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The Divine Dark:
Absurdism and Mysticism in the work of
Luigi Pirandello and Eugène Ionesco.

by Alison C. Booth

A thesis submitted to the University of Bristol
in accordance with the requirements
for the degree of Ph.D. in the Faculty of Arts,
July 1988.

ABSTRACT

The motif of the loss of centre pervades the writing of Pirandello and Ionesco both as an explicit theme and as an artistic strategy. The terms in which they present the crisis are identical to those of the Absurd as defined by Camus in Le Mythe de Sisyphe. Sometimes the Absurd experience is portrayed by Pirandello and Ionesco in a positive light, emerging as a mystical experience. Absurdism and mysticism share a number of parallel structures and common assumptions. Mystical themes and structures are often present in the subtext of Pirandello and Ionesco's writing, as well as playing a key role in their plots, style, imagery and presentation of character. While the mystical consciousness is best evoked in prose narrative, it is also found in their dramatic texts as a structuring device. Pirandello's work evinces a wide range of mystical experience which can also be seen as integral to his notions of madness and humour. Mystical experience lies at the root of Ionesco's art and is closely linked, both thematically and formally, to his views of dream and childhood. The visionary moment underpins the writing of his early iconoclastic plays but becomes the central focus in his later works. In both authors the quest for permanent mystical plenitude is shown to fail and concludes in a double perspective which is at once an existential condition as well as an aesthetic mode. This mode manifests itself in double structures such as the grotesque, the fantastic, tragicomedy, humour and irony.

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George Brandt, formerly Professor of Drama at Bristol, will be surprised to find his name here. He is probably unaware that on hearing the subject of this thesis he unwittingly encouraged me with the perplexed remark, "Pirandello and Ionesco.... but what possible connection can there be?!!"

And finally, my friends, to whom this thesis is dedicated. Clare Wilding's generosity, clear-sightedness and no-nonsense advice have been an invaluable support. Phil Lyons too has been a model of equanimity as well as a stimulating fellow researcher. I owe an immense debt to my flatmates, Jane, Elva, David, Kieron and Mike who not only gave me their loyal friendship but were admirably tolerant of "PhD Blues". I am particularly grateful to Steven Willoughby and my 'medical' friends who, in the depth of my impecuniousness took me out for meals, drove me all over the country for holidays and never left me out. I could not have wished for better friends and I cannot thank them enough for their love and generosity.

I declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own,
and was not conducted in collaboration with,
or with the assistance of others.

Alison C BAH

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The following abbreviations have been used in the text and footnotes. For information on the editions see the Bibliography, Primary Sources.

Pirandello

<u>MN I</u>	<u>Maschere Nude volume one</u>
<u>MN II</u>	<u>Maschere Nude volume two</u>
<u>NA I</u>	<u>Novelle per un anno volume one</u>
<u>NA II</u>	<u>Novelle per un anno volume two</u>
<u>TR</u>	<u>Tutti i romanzi</u>
<u>SPSV</u>	<u>Saggi, Poesie, Scritti varii</u>

Ionesco

<u>TH I to TH VII</u>	<u>- Théâtre I to Théâtre VII</u>
<u>NCN</u>	<u>Notes et contre-notes</u>
<u>JM</u>	<u>Journal en miettes</u>
<u>PPPP</u>	<u>Présent passé, passé présent</u>
<u>ANT</u>	<u>Antidotes</u>
<u>ECB</u>	<u>Entretiens avec Claude Bonnefoy</u>
<u>HQ</u>	<u>Un Homme en question</u>
<u>LS</u>	<u>Le Solitaire</u>
<u>LPC</u>	<u>La Photo du Colonel</u>
<u>LQI</u>	<u>La Quête intermittente</u>
<u>DEC</u>	<u>Découvertes</u>

INTRODUCTION

All serious thinking about art must begin from the recognition of two apparently contradictory facts: that an important work is always, in an irreducible sense, individual; and yet that there are authentic communities of works of art, in kinds, periods and styles.

Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Brecht

In 1956 Frank Sedwick published the results of "three years of study and two drawers of notes" on the subject of "conscious mutual influence" between Pirandello and Unamuno.¹ One of his findings was that "the linking of Pirandello's name with another has become a twentieth-century literary occupation", producing eighteen studies to date. Since 1956 the Theatre of the Absurd has had its full impact on scholarship, producing a plethora of comparative studies based on Pirandello's work and a number of general studies of twentieth century drama citing Pirandello as a key figure.² In the light of this, a further comparative study demands a consideration of the background and assumptions of such industry.

The delineation and definition of "authentic communities of works of art" is a complex task which has been rendered more so in recent times by the cross-fertilisation between academic disciplines which has produced a multiplicity of methodologies, and by the modern elevation of originality and innovation into the sine qua non of art. In the context of comparative studies in particular, a related problem is that of interpreting the significance of similarities whether between individual authors or periods of history. This is a field fraught with overlapping terms: tradition, legacy, mode, perennial concern, recurrent theme, parallel response, continuum of speculation, and so on. One of the problems would seem to lie in the difficulty of distinguishing whether a recurrent phenomenon is the

result of a chain of causation, of being 'passed on' in some way, or whether it is a spontaneous re-surfacing of a common, archetypal reaction, sparked off by contingent social or psychological circumstance. By way of illustration we might consider a work connected with one of the authors to be studied here. In his book The Theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin includes a chapter entitled "The Tradition of the Absurd", in which he attempts to locate the origins and "germs" of the artistic phenomenon in question. The chapter provoked the following comment from the critic Kenneth Tynan:

Tracing the forebears of the Absurd, Mr. Esslin leads us back to the mime plays of antiquity; to the Commedia dell'Arte; to Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll; to Jarry, Strindberg, and the young, Rimbaud-impregnated Brecht; to the Dadaists and Tristan Tzara ...; to the Surrealists and Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty; to Kafka, and to Joyce.

All this is helpful and credible. But when Mr. Esslin ropes in Shakespeare, Goethe, and Ibsen as harbingers of the Absurd, one begins to feel that the whole history of dramatic literature has been nothing but a prelude to the glorious emergence of Beckett and Ionesco.³

It would seem that Esslin failed to mark clearly enough (at least for Tynan's tastes) where the notion of tradition ceased to embrace the ideas of causation and shared cultural context and passed over into the realm of something more vague and intangible.

More recently Esslin's study and the genre of comparative studies it represents have attracted a different type of criticism which takes us back to the original problem of establishing "communities of works of art". In his book The Modern Stage and Other Worlds, Austin Quigley devotes the whole of the first part to an examination of the theoretical problems of generalising about modern theatre. He notes the recurrence of studies which seek to establish a "Theatre of X" - X standing either for the Absurd, for 'Protest and Paradox', for Revolt, the Marvellous, Commitment or whatever. Such studies uncover extensive common ground among very

diverse works and attempt to "develop these recurring textual details into a structural and thematic generalisation which characterises a particular kind of theatre."⁴ Quigley accuses the authors of such studies of basing literary categories on elements which may well be pervasive but are not necessarily central to either individual plays or groups of plays. These studies emphasise common ground at the expense of accounting for differences. Quigley demonstrates the need for comparative studies to be based on patterns of details and elements not just on the sharing of one element.

This thesis concerns a pattern of linked thematic and artistic similarities in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco. Such a pattern may be accounted for by a number of factors. The two writers may share the same literary and historical context. If facts suggest it, the possibility of influence of one over the other may be investigated. But in the absence of specific historical and cultural links, certain general assumptions can be made about the existence of particular casts of mind or of archetypal ways in which human beings respond to certain situations: "certain world visions can be seen at different periods of history in works of very different subject matter, genre and tone."⁵ As we have seen in the case of 'The Tradition of the Absurd', it is not always easy to distinguish these factors clearly. In the case of the pattern shared by Pirandello and Ionesco, I shall argue that while both are certainly grounded in a shared historical and cultural context, there are parallel elements in their work which go well beyond the common point of departure. In order to illustrate this and to situate the study in a critical context, it is useful to consider the phenomenon of Pirandellism itself.

The problem of labelling, naming and classifying is of course a major theme in Pirandello's works, and as his late play Quando si è qualcuno (1933) indicates, it was a subject of personal importance too. Pirandello repeatedly claimed that he was misunderstood by his contemporaries.

"Paris ne me comprend pas. Paris a mis un masque sur mon visage" is only one such accusation.⁶ If he felt himself to be the victim of injustice during his lifetime he would have been appalled and fascinated to see the fandangos which criticism has danced with his name since then. On the one hand his name has been imprisoned in a critical concept, becoming synonymous with radical pessimism and theatrical innovation. Yet on the other hand the amount of writing examining his relationship with the many sub-groups within modernism, his complicated position with regard to Naturalism and to Post-modernism would seem to vindicate his own ideas on the fluidity and relativity of identity.

This critical hyperactivity can be seen to be the result of a number of factors, the first of which, historically speaking, is the cult of Pirandellism which arose out of the "succès de scandale" of Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore and the popularising of Pirandello's 'philosophy' by Adriano Tilgher. Ironically enough even this has become the subject of critical excavations with Giudice delineating no less than five varieties of Pirandellism.⁷

Closely linked to the cult is Pirandello's immense influence on the modern stage, a fact which frequently verges on the mythical through a failure on the part of commentators to distinguish clearly between direct and indirect influence. Two comments from the results of the questionnaire "Pirandello, vous a-t-il influencé?" illustrate the point perfectly. Georges Neveux claims: "Sans Pirandello et sans les Pitoëff ... nous n'aurions eu ni Salacrou, ni Anouilh, ni aujourd'hui Ionesco, ni ... mais je m'arrête, cette énumération serait interminable. Tout le théâtre d'une époque est sorti du ventre de cette pièce [Sei personaggi]." Two lines below this is Ionesco's reply: "Je ne crois pas avoir été particulièrement influencé par Pirandello."⁸ Yet critics have continued to make vague and heady claims for Pirandello's influence. Brustein in 1964 dubs him "the

most seminal dramatist of our time" while a more recent account states "it has taken much time to see just how deep and pervasive Pirandello's influence on twentieth century drama has been, and indeed continues to be. He has been hailed as ... the Einstein of the drama, responsible for an entire revolution in man's attitude to the world."⁹ Such statements make Pirandello an inevitable choice in comparative studies.

But if Pirandello draws critical attention because of his reputation for innovation and influence, I would also argue that his work has a protean, multi-faceted quality which means that it is equally attractive for its typicality. Situated at the enormous cultural crossroads of the development of Naturalism into Modernism, and embracing a variety of genres, Pirandello's writing is studied in a large number of contexts: "Verismo", "Teatro del grottesco", surrealism, Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism, Symbolism, "Decadentismo".¹⁰ Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore, as Maurice Valency rightly suggests, stands at the storm-centre of the modernist whirlwind: "The Symbolists, the Cubists, the Futurists and the Surrealists all claimed it for their own".¹¹ In the light of this, the label "Pirandellian" is virtually synonymous with "modernist". Furthermore, if Pirandello's work reflected the diverse aspects of the artistic activity of its own time, it is equally frequently cited as anticipating future developments. De Castris talks of "quel valore novecentescamente rappresentativo di Pirandello, in virtù del quale ogni stadio del suo cammino intellettuale ed artistico rivela immancabilmente una intuizione precorritrice, e spesso una matura prefigurazione di poetica, di tutte le avanguardie e le crisi espressive della cultura letteraria contemporanea."¹²

Pirandello's ideas can also be seen as typical. If one brand of Pirandellism reduces Pirandello's work to metatheatrical pyrotechnics, another brand, of Tilgherian inspiration, distinguishes him on the basis of

his philosophy. I would argue that so-called Pirandellian ideas were not the invention of Pirandello but were the "freely-circulated legal tender" of the age.¹³

One might be forgiven for assuming that such lavish and broad-based critical attention would produce a fully rounded appreciation of Pirandello's work. This is far from the case, particularly in English language studies which tend to be those in which a comparative approach is most frequently taken. The result of constant scrutiny of his work, not on its own terms but in terms of influence, or 'anticipation', is a reductive image of him as the creator of pessimistic metatheatre. The conclusion of Thomas Bishop's study of Pirandello and the French Theatre runs: "The essence of Pirandello's theatre is the marrow of contemporary ideas, of modern anxieties and pessimism."¹⁴ Richard Gilman characterises Pirandello as "one of the great dramatic technicians of alienation, one of the foremost theatrical poets of self-division and internal abyss..¹⁵ All this is quite true but it is only half of the picture.

Critics have indeed frequently acknowledged the injustice done to Pirandello because of Pirandellism: Gilman refers to the "generally held belief that Pirandello's central and peculiarly contemporary quality as a writer is his 'relativism' and that his major achievement lies in having infused the drama, that obdurately absolutist medium, with a principle of uncertainty and doubt", and he comments that "there is truth in this, but elevated into a full-scale interpretation it has resulted in a kind of debased Pirandellianism".¹⁶ Oscar Büdel too comments on the inaccuracy of the "widespread image of the radical iconoclast" which is made of Pirandello.¹⁷

In many ways Ionesco has suffered a similar fate through being linked early in his career with a "community" of works of art, the Theatre of the Absurd. Like Pirandello, Ionesco is commonly associated with radical

pessimism and dramatic iconoclasm. The problem here is not only that of the conflicting claims of individuality and typicality, as indicated by Williams' statement quoted at the beginning of this introduction. It is also a question of criticism allowing its "working hypotheses" (Esslin's own description of his label 'theatre of the absurd') to become critical absolutes. The 'community', based on the common features of a number of individual works, ends up by becoming the 'lens' through which other works are viewed and judged.

Although the present study took its initial impulse from this critical babel surrounding Pirandello's work, the approach taken involved a consideration of the work of the two authors independent of matters of genre and of their relationship to the many relevant '-isms' and existing critical frameworks. The aim here is not to show Ionesco to be Pirandellian nor to prove Pirandello to be an Absurdist writer 'ante litteram'. Nor is the study concerned with influence in any way, whether in terms of dramatic technique or ideas. Putting aside Ionesco's denial of Pirandellian influence on his work, such an approach rests I believe on shaky foundations. The impossibility of talking about Pirandellian influence in any precise way when the ideas and dramatic devices have been in general circulation for a good thirty years, is quite apparent in Thomas Bishop's book. The issue is difficult to unravel already by the time of Giraudoux: "Either Giraudoux was directly influenced to some degree by Pirandello's play or, as seems more probable, he reflected the theatrical atmosphere of the time".¹⁸

I have considered the work of the two writers initially in terms of their personal, poetic vision - "un particolare senso della vita" as Pirandello calls it - and the ways in which this is expressed. Such an approach is consonant with the way both see their literary activity. Whereas Pirandello insists that he wrote his life rather than lived it,

Ionesco declares that writing is the only thing he has ever been able to do. This is an approach rarely taken in Pirandellian comparative studies which are usually circumscribed by considerations of genre. The pattern of similarities which emerges from this initial 'tabula rasa' approach reveals a thematic and aesthetic dimension in the work of the two writers which prompts a reconsideration of the terms in which they are conventionally classified, and which might have remained neglected or ^{been} considered marginal had the study used an established frame of reference.

As might be expected there are elements in the pattern which have already been recognised and analysed by commentators. The dismantling of theatrical form, for example, is a much discussed topic, which I have dealt with in as much as it is relevant and integral to the new material. Where there are certain aspects of the pattern which are not unique to Pirandello and Ionesco, then I have referred to the relevant works or writers either in my exposition or in my notes.

Although I would stress that the subject of this thesis emerges from the juxtaposition of the two authors in a totally different context from that of genre and history, I have not of course presented and interpreted the material in a historical or aesthetic 'vacuum'. One feature of twentieth century Western culture is particularly relevant to the two authors. Once their common ground with the Surrealists, Expressionists and Existentialists has been taken as read, it emerges that what distinguishes Pirandello and Ionesco from their fellow modernists is not the measure of their desolation but the terms in which they present it, which they have outstandingly in common with one other writer – the Camus of Le Mythe de Sisyphe. All three writers recognise that all human dealings with the world are governed by a desire for unity. This perception gives unity to both the thematic and aesthetic elements in the pattern of similarities between Pirandello and Ionesco.

However, what sets the two writers apart from other modern writers and indeed other Absurdist is their exploration of the desire for unity in the context of mystical experience. It is this element in their work which is the main focus of this thesis. I shall show that the dimension of their work which concerns the perception of an Absolute reality is not an aberration or anomaly in modern writing but is inextricably linked with Absurdism. Mystical experience emerges as a logical development of Absurdist despair and is an integral part of their vision, influencing plot, imagery, diction and tone. Examination of this positive dimension to Pirandello's and Ionesco's work not only deepens our understanding of their individual modes of writing, but also forces us to evaluate anew both their pessimism and that of the Absurd. Often dismissed as "a nihilistic reaction to the recent atrocities", the Absurd is increasingly seen in archetypal or universal terms.¹⁹ Indeed Camus makes it clear in his essay that the crisis he is describing is primarily a perennial psychological experience as well as the dominant spirit of the modern age. Jerome Ashmore remarks:

Most criticism of the Theatre of the Absurd pays little or no attention to the intrinsic aspect of absurdity. The point generally overlooked is that absurdity perennially has been almost an inherent property of the thought and action of mankind.²⁰

Ashmore's article on "The Interdisciplinary Roots of the Theatre of the Absurd" covers writers as diverse as Pascal, the Gnostics, Augustine and Martin Buber. He concludes that "The Theatre of the Absurd has assimilated and represented the historically enduring concept of the absurd, the existential philosophy and the contemporary human predicament."²¹ Illiano too relates the Absurd element in Pirandello to a broader context: "But while it foreshadows existential anguish, dread, and anxiety, the Pirandellian awareness is more properly considered within the context of Western irrationalism".²² It would seem that the concept of the Absurd is undergoing a similar sea-change to that undergone by the term 'Romanticism'

– once seen in terms of a movement it is now recognised as a perennial response or type of consciousness. The emergence of a mystical dimension to the Absurd consolidates this view of the phenomenon as a variation on an age-old theme.

If criticism has so far failed to scrutinise this aspect of Absurdity in Pirandello and Ionesco I believe it is due to the limitations imposed by genre-based studies and by Pirandello's reputation as an innovator in the theatre. Mystical experience is not easily expressed in theatrical terms. Much of the mystical material in Pirandello's work is to be found in his novelle and novels. Considerations of genre are not central in this study. They are made only with respect to the expression of a particular type of consciousness.

In contrast to Pirandello, Ionesco has repeatedly tried to dramatise mystical experience but just as Pirandello has been limited by his reputation, so Ionesco has been distorted by his association with the Theatre of the Absurd. The religious aspects of his work which are not accounted for under that heading, have only recently been considered by critics, partly because they come to the foreground in his later work, partly because Ionesco himself has pointed them out. As in the case of Pirandello, mysticism is most explicitly treated in his prose writing. These elements were there from the start and are integral to his vision and art.

The notion that subversion and satire could be manifestations of a religious sensibility has, however, not entirely eluded critics. Antonio Illiano interprets the Absurd imagination as "the expression of a humanistic concern which degrades matter and extols spirituality.." ²³ In his chapter on "The Significance of the Absurd" Martin Esslin notes the links between the Absurd and a religious or mystical view of life:

In expressing the tragic sense of loss at the disappearance of

ultimate certainties the Theatre of the Absurd, by a strange paradox, is also a symptom of what probably comes nearest to being a genuine religious quest in our age: an effort, however timid and tentative, to sing, to laugh, to weep – and to growl – if not in praise of God ... at least in search of a dimension of the Ineffable; an effort to make man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, to instil in him again the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish, to shock him out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical, complacent and deprived of the dignity that comes of awareness.²⁴

This study, whilst elaborating and illustrating these ideas, goes beyond them. Esslin presents the mystical aspect of Absurdism as though this were simply a way of construing the phenomenon. What is striking and important in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco is that the mysticism is explicit and is explored. This is not an interpretation that I have imposed on the material. In the case of Ionesco in particular mysticism is a key experience in his life.

Furthermore, Esslin's view of mysticism is somewhat narrow. There is a common assumption – made also by Illiano – that the mystical Absolute is necessarily transcendent. Thomas Merton brings out the innately Pirandellian procedure of mysticism.

... for anyone who has seriously entered into the medieval Christian, or the Hindu, or the Buddhist conceptions of contempus mundi, mara and 'the emptiness of the world', it will be evident that this means not the rejection of a reality, but the unmasking of an illusion.²⁵

Mysticism is also a more diverse phenomenon than is commonly known. I shall show that many of its aspects have relevance to the work of Pirandello and Ionesco.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the theme of the loss of centre, a motif central in the writing of both Pirandello and Ionesco and which is also the common denominator of the Absurd and mysticism. Focusing largely on the plays, I establish how the loss of centre is not only a theme explored on many levels from the psychological to the political, but is also a major consideration in the dramatic form and effect of their

work.

In the second chapter I show how the crisis of the loss of centre is expressed in terms identical to those used by Camus in his essay on the Absurd, Le Mythe de Sisyphe. Reference is also made to Sartre's La Nausée and Adamov's L'Aveu. I go on to illustrate how in the works of Pirandello and Ionesco this same crisis is sometimes presented in a positive light, and emerges as a mystical experience. An investigation of the parallels between the Absurd and mystical experiences is followed by some consideration of the possible sources of the mystical element in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco. Brief indication is also given of notable parallels in the work of other modern writers and artistic movements.

The third chapter focuses on the function of the visionary moment in the work of Pirandello, illustrating the range of 'other-worldly' experiences, the way they interact with his views on madness and "umorismo" and their effect on his style. I suggest that although the visionary theme finds its most suitable artistic expression in Pirandello's prose writing, it also plays an important role in the structure of his plays and in his depiction of dramatic characters.

The many roles of visionary experience in the work of Ionesco form the subject of the fourth chapter. The theme is inextricably linked to Ionesco's perception of childhood and dream, and forms the basis of his artistic theories. I show that visionary experience underpins even the most iconoclastic, 'Absurd' early plays, particularly in the imagery. Increasingly in Ionesco's work, the visionary experience becomes a key event in the plot and finally stands as the central theme of the longer plays. Ionesco uses dramatic form to explore the significance of the experience, a development which affects his presentation of character and the relationships between characters.

In the fifth chapter I focus on the existential crisis which sometimes

results from the visionary moment. Both authors examine the problem of making visionary plenitude permanent, a quest shown to fail and to lead to a stalemate, a state of suspension between two orders of reality. I then illustrate how mystical themes and imagery are present in the subtext of some of Pirandello's works and how in Ionesco's final plays, mysticism and dream are conflated. The unconscious becomes the mystical beyond.

The outcome of the visionary quest in Pirandello and Ionesco can be seen to have a number of aesthetic results which are examined in the sixth chapter. Their works are pervaded by double perspectives and modes of writing characterised by ambiguity and double structures. Finally I show how certain aesthetic stances are also existential strategies, equally a feature of Le Mythe de Sisyphe. The visionary experience here becomes a metaphor for human consciousness.

INTRODUCTION NOTES

¹ Frank Sedwick, "Unamuno and Pirandello Revisited", Italica 33, No.1 (1956), pp.40-51.

² The following list is of comparative studies only. The titles of many 'overviews' of modern drama may be found in the bibliography of this thesis:

Carol White Aycock, "The Theatre of Luigi Pirandello: Precedents and Parallels in Modern Art" (PhD Dissertation, University of Georgia, 1980).

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Susan Bassnett, "From Gods to Giants - Theatrical Parallels between Edward Dunsany and Luigi Pirandello", The Yearbook of the British Pirandello Society, 6 (1986), pp.40-49.

Thomas Bishop, Pirandello and the French Theatre (New York: New York University Press, 1960).

Marlis Zeller Cambon, "Max Frisch und Luigi Pirandello: Eine Untersuchung zur thematischen Affinität ihren Romane" (PhD Dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, 1976).

Hoover W. Clark, "Existentialism and Pirandello's Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore", Italica, 43, No.3 (1966), pp.276-84.

Beatrice Corrigan, "Pirandello and the Theatre of the Absurd", Cesare Barbieri Courier 8, No.1 (Spring 1960), pp.3-6.

Graziella Corsinovi, Pirandello e l'Espressionismo (Genova: Tilgher-Genova, 1979).

Bernard Dort, "Pirandello et le Théâtre français". Théâtre Populaire No.45 (1962), pp.105-128.

Alba-Marie Fazia, "Luigi Pirandello and Jean Anouilh" (PhD Dissertation, University of Columbia, 1954).

Alba-Marie Fazia, "Pirandello and his French echo Anouilh", Modern Drama 6, 4 (1964), pp.346-367.

Silvio Gaggi, "Brecht, Pirandello and Two Traditions of Self-critical Art", Theatre Quarterly, 8, No.32 (Winter 1979), pp.42-46.

Charles J. Gattnig Jr., "Pirandello, 'Umorismo' and Beckett" (PhD Dissertation, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1967).

Giovanni Gullace, "Pirandello e l'Esistenzialismo", Forum Italicum 1, 4 (Winter 1967), pp.267-278.

Antonio Illiano, "A View of the Italian Absurd from Pirandello to Eduardo de Filippo", in From Surrealism to the Absurd. Proceedings of the Third Comparative Literature Symposium, 29-30 Jan. 1970, ed. Wolodymyr T. Zyla, pp.55-76.

Francis Jeanson, "Pirandello et Camus à travers Henri IV et Caligula", Les Temps Modernes, No.61 (Nov. 1950).

Tai Yul Kim, "Three Aesthetics of the Mask: Nietzsche, Yeats and Pirandello" (PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 1974).

W.E. Leparulo, "Ipotesi per la risoluzione del rapporto Pirandello-Camus", Italica 57, No.1 (1980), pp.34-42.

W.E. Leparulo, "Il teatro di Luigi Pirandello a Albert Camus", Italian Quarterly 21, No.80 (1980), pp.53-59.

Irene McKenna, "The Grotesque in the Early Novels of Sherwood Anderson and Luigi Pirandello" (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1978).

Edith Melcher, "The Pirandellism of Jean Genet", French Review 36 (Oct. 1962), pp.32-36.

Georgiana Frances O'Keefe-Bazzoni, "Avant-garde Italian Drama: Futurists, 'i grotteschi' and Pirandello" (PhD Dissertation, City University of New York, 1983).

Anne Paolucci, "Pirandello and the Waiting Stage of the Absurd (with some observations on a new 'critical language')", Modern Drama 23, 2 (1980), pp.102-111.

Michael H. Rocchi, "Twentieth Century Blues: A Study of Affinities between Harold Pinter and Luigi Pirandello" (PhD Dissertation, University of Washington, 1980).

Edward B. Savage, "Masks and Mummeries in Enrico IV and Caligula", Modern Drama 6, 4 (1964), pp.397-401.

Neil Herman Timm, "A Comparative Study of Pirandello, Yeats and Brecht: The Mask as a Paradigm for Modern Theatre" (PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1973).

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Claudio Vicentini, "Pirandello, Stanislavsky, Brecht and the 'opposition principle'", Modern Drama 20 (1977), pp.381-92.

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Modern Drama 24, 3 (1981) - 4 articles on Pirandello and Hamlet.

Claudel Studies 7, 2 (1980) - 8 articles on Pirandello and Claudel.

³ Kenneth Tynan, Tynan on Theatre p.190. Quoted by Arnold P. Hinchcliffe, The Absurd, The Critical Idiom No.5 (London: Methuen, 1969, reprint edn., 1974), p.8.

⁴ Austin E. Quigley, The Modern Stage and Other Worlds (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p.57.

⁵ Lucien Goldmann and René Girard, quoted by Jacques Dubois, "Beckett and Ionesco: the tragic awareness of Pascal and the Ironic Awareness of Flaubert", Modern Drama 9 (1966), pp.283-291.

⁶ Attributed, without reference, to Pirandello in Jean-Michel Gardair, Pirandello: fantasmes et logique du double (Paris: Larousse, Collection "thèmes et textes", 1972), p.134. Ionesco expresses similar sentiments: "Depuis que j'écris des pièces de théâtre que l'on joue, je n'ai pas réussi à m'habituer aux erreurs d'interprétation, ni à celles des 'interprètes' que sont les comédiens, ni à la fausse interprétation des critiques, ou du public" (PPPP 254).

⁷ Gaspare Giudice, Pirandello (Torino: UTET, 1963), pp.400-410. Referred to by Gino Rizzo in "Pirandello versus Pirandellism", Cesare Barbieri Courier 9 (Spring 1967), p.4. The notion of 'Pirandellism' had certainly reached England by 1925. See George F. Holland, "Pirandelloism", The Curtain 4, No.42 (1925).

⁸ "Pirandello vous a-t-il influencé?" Arts Lettres Spectacles (Paris) No.602 (Jan 16th - 23rd, 1957).

⁹ Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt (London: Methuen, 1965), p.316. James MacFarlane, "Neo-modernist Drama: Yeats and Pirandello" in Modernism, ed. Bradbury and Macfarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p.569.

¹⁰ On Pirandello and the "grotteschi", see Gigi Livio, Il teatro in rivolta: Futurismo, grottesco, Pirandello e pirandellismo (Milan: Mursia, 1976).

On Pirandello and Futurism, see Gino Rizzo, "Futurism, Pirandello and the Contemporary Theatre" in Altro Polo ed. N. Newbigin and S. Trambaiolo (Sydney: University of Sydney Press, 1978), pp.91-105

and
Claudio Vicentini, "la trilogia pirandelliana del teatro nel teatro e le proposte della teatralità futurista", The Yearbook of the British Pirandello Society 3 (1983), pp.15-32

and
Jennifer Stone, "The Naked Prompt: A semiotic study of Pirandello's plays" (PhD Dissertation, University of London, 1982), Chapter II, section 2, "The Cubo-Futurist Palimpsest" and Chapter IV section 1, "Futurist Scenography".

On Pirandello and Cubism, see Jennifer Stone, "Pirandello's Picassos", The Italianist No.2 (1982), pp.15-39.

On Pirandello in the context of Symbolism see Maurice Valency, The End of the World: An Introduction to Contemporary Drama (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

On Pirandello and Surrealism, see Arminio Janner, Pirandello (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1947).

On Pirandello and the Italian Decadents, see Carlo Salinari, Miti e coscienza del decadentismo italiano (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1960).

It is interesting that the way different critics see Pirandello's despair depends on whether they approach him from a twentieth century or nineteenth century perspective. Maurice Valency, from the Symbolist perspective, claims that Pirandello "was never really a Pirandellian" and only embraced Pirandellism because it was fashionable (p.167). He dubs Pirandello "an outraged moralist", calling his anger "the high fury of Garibaldi, not the cold madness of the 1920s" (p.165). Yet Antonio Illiano, from the Absurdist perspective, refers to Il fu Mattia Pascal as "the first Absurdist classic of modern literature" (p.59).

¹¹ Valency, p.151.

¹² Arcangelo Leone de Castris, Storia di Pirandello (Bari: Universale Laterza, 1978), p.192.

¹³ Gide, for example, at the same time as Pirandello wrote Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore, created a fragmented, self-conscious novel whose "sujet profond" was

La rivalité du monde réel et de la représentation que nous nous en faisons. La manière dont le monde des apparences s'impose à nous et dont nous tentons d'imposer au monde extérieur notre interprétation particulière, fait le drame de notre vie" (Les Faux-Monnayeurs [Gallimard, Folio: 1925], p.201).

His relativism might also be called Pirandellian: "La vérité est multiple, infinie, nombreuse, autant que les esprits pour y croire".

Compare also the view of death in Pirandello's "La Trappola" with that of Romain Rolland:

Il n'y a aucun rapport entre l'idée de la souffrance et l'être qui saigne et qui souffre. Il n'y a aucun rapport entre la pensée de la mort et les convulsions de la chair et de l'âme qui se débat et meurt. Tout le langage humain, toute la sagesse humaine n'est qu'un guignol de raides automates auprès de l'éblouissement funèbre de la réalité - ces misérables êtres de boue et de sang, dont tout le vain effort est de fixer une vie qui pourrit d'heure en heure

(Jean-Christophe, Vol.1 [Paris: Albin Michel, 1931], p.134.)

It should also be remembered that Ibsen had shown the evils of moral conventions long before Pirandello and that Strindberg had introduced the notion of 'fragmented' personality in drama in his Preface to Miss Julie (1888) as well as attempting to reflect the fluidity of dream in theatrical form.

Ideas would seem to be the least reliable indicators of cultural change. If one reflects on the depth and speed of change between Pirandello's generation and the 1970s it seems barely credible that Erica Jong's heroine in Fear of Flying can be found nonchalantly expounding what appears to be

Pirandellismo: "I didn't believe in systems. Everything human was imperfect and ultimately absurd", and "Life has no plot. It is far more interesting than anything you can say about it because language by its very nature orders things and life really has no order" (Fear of Flying [St. Albans: Granada, 1974], pp.121 and 170). This "girar sempre sullo stesso pernio" as Pirandello might have called it, can be seen as the result of a self-perpetuating mechanism within modernism: if all reality is illusion or construction then all assertions are futile and art is reduced to the role of demonstrating the illusoriness of everything including itself. This "general stalemate" or "impenetrable general condition" has been brilliantly expounded by Raymond Williams in Modern Tragedy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966, rev. edn. Verso, 1979), p.152.

The difficulty of pinning down changes in consciousness is evident when commentators attempt to date the modern age – some point to the First World War, others to Jarry's Ubu Roi, others to Ibsen, Flaubert, even going as far back as Büchner. Labouring over the "Name and Nature of Modernism" James Macfarlane and Malcolm Bradbury point to an anthology, The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature, which evinces a perception of "a modern tradition that reaches well back into the romantic era and beyond" (Modernism, p.32). All of this would seem to vindicate Quigley's appeal for overviews based on patterns of similarities in both ideas and form.

14 Bishop, p.148.

15 Richard Gilman, The Making of Modern Drama (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p.157.

16 Ibid., p.158.

17 Oscar Büdel, "Luigi Pirandello: The Anti-Illusionist 'malgré lui'", Cesare Barbieri Courier, 9 (Spring 1967), p.8.

18 Bishop, p.96.

19 J.L. Styan, Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, Vol.2: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.125.

20 Jerome Ashmore, "Interdisciplinary Roots of the Theatre of the Absurd", Modern Drama, 14 (1971-2), p.72.

21 Ibid., p.83.

22 Illiano, p.62.

23 Ibid., p.70.

24 Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, rev. edn., 1968), p.390.

25 Thomas Merton, "Is the World a Problem?" quoted by Melvyn Matthews in "Who told you that you were naked?", Areopagus (Bristol), 21 (May 1987).

CHAPTER 1

'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation
John Donne

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
W.B. Yeats

May God us keep
From single vision and Newton's sleep.
William Blake

I The Copernican Crisis

Maledetto sia Copernico! ... Copernico, Copernico, don Eligio mio,
ha rovinato l'umanità, irrimediabilmente.
Il fu Mattia Pascal

The pattern of similarities between the work of Pirandello and Ionesco is complex and functions on aesthetic as well as numerous thematic levels. The thread which will lead us through this labyrinth is the motif of the Copernican crisis or the loss of a centre which is referred to by both authors in different contexts.¹

Copernicus acquires a kind of emblematic status in Pirandello's writing. He is mentioned in L'umorismo as the archetypal humorist in that he "smontò non propriamente la macchina dell'universo, ma l'orgogliosa immagine che ce n'eravamo fatta" (SPSV 156).² The sixteenth century astronomer clearly takes his place in Pirandello's mythology not as a scientist but in a poetic capacity as the chosen patron saint of 'umorismo', a view of the fragmented universe which is more of a literary stance than a philosophic system.

A discussion of the implications of Copernicus' discovery takes up the larger part of the second chapter of the novel Il fu Mattia Pascal, the

"Premessa Seconda (Filosofica) a Mo' di Scusa" which alerts the reader to a plethora of meanings in the novel by positing the basis of both the plot and the style of writing. Copernicus here emerges as an emblem for philosophical, religious and literary crises. The repositioning of the earth implies the revaluation of humankind in the cosmos. By expelling the earth from the centre of the universe Copernicus expels the human race from a privileged position as the beloved creature and object of Divine attention and intention. The cosmos ceases to function at the bidding of a benevolent deity to serve purely human needs. Humanity's affairs become "storie di vermucci ormai" and men and women "atomi infinitesimali" (TR 269).

With this new perspective an incongruous double image is born. Contradicting our sense of the greatness of human achievement - "tutte le nostre belle scoperte e invenzioni" (TR 269) - and the horror of our sufferings, is the cosmic perspective in which we are "men che niente nell'Universo" and in which the earth is "un'invisibile trottolina, cui fa da ferza un fil di sole, ... un granellino di sabbia impazzito che gira e gira e gira, senza saper perché, senza pervenir mai a destino,..." (TR 268). Human affairs are swallowed up in the infinity of time and space and bereft of purpose. The double perspective is echoed in L'umorismo where Pirandello remarks that man is small compared with the rest of the universe but he can nevertheless conceive the vastness of the cosmos in his mind "e come si può dir piccolo dunque l'uomo?" (SPSV 157). Doubleness and double perspectives are central to Pirandello's art and will be important themes in this thesis too.

The Copernican universe is of course the relative universe of the twentieth century. In Mattia Pascal's "premesse" the library in which he works, the "chiesetta sconsacrata", is a microcosm of the 'post-Copernican' world. Its main characteristic is chaos - "questa vera babilonia di libri". In the same way that the church has lost its main purpose, it

turns out that the books of Monsignor Boccamazza are not, as was expected, on religion but in fact embraced "una varietà grandissima di materie" (TR 267). This unordered variety results in the librarians' work being aimless and their reading random. We are told too of how the damp makes the books stick together in unusual pairings:

don Eligio Pellegrinotto mi ha detto, ad esempio, che ha stentato non poco a staccare da un trattato molto licenzioso Dell'arte di amar le donne, libri tre di Anton Muzio Porro, dell'anno 1571, una Vita e morte di Faustino Materucci, Benedettino di Polirone che taluni chiamano beato, biografia edita a Mantova nel 1625. Per l'umidità, le legature de' due volumi si erano fraternamente appiccate. Notare che nel libro secondo di quel trattato licenzioso si discorre a lungo della vita e delle avventure monacali (TR 267).

The observation crystallises two Pirandellian themes – the relativity of reality and the irrationality of human nature – as well as providing an emblem of the aesthetic of 'umorismo'.

Indeed Pirandello attaches precise literary results to the Copernican crisis. Copernicus, described in L'umorismo as "uno dei più grandi umoristi senza saperlo" (SPSV 156), is a humorist precisely because he originated the double perspective, whose ambiguity is the very source of humour as Pirandello sees it. In Il fu Mattia Pascal Copernicus is seen as the father of modernism. If humankind has so little importance in the cosmos then all the tiny details which form the basis of Realism are irrelevant and unjustified. "Il signor conte si levò per tempo, alle ore otto e mezzo precise... La signora contessa indossò un abito lilla con una ricca fioritura di merletti alla gola ..." (TR 268). This style of writing is the product of an anthropocentric view of the universe.

The anachronism which links Copernicus, a man of the sixteenth century, to a mode of writing belonging predominantly to the nineteenth century, is intentional, and is pointed out by don Eligio: books have never been so full of human detail as after Copernicus, he says. While we might account for this historically by seeing in Realism a literary

response to Positivist science and the confidence it engendered in Europeans in their ability to control and comprehend the natural world and the human body, don Eligio's point is different. He says that the Copernican crisis is an eternal problem because it attacks the fundamental human need for a purpose in life. Science has made many assaults on human pride and on our illusion of importance since Copernicus:

Don Eligio Pellegrinotto mi fa però osservare che, per quanti sforzi facciamo nel crudele intento di strappare, di distruggere le illusioni che la provvida natura ci aveva create a fin di bene, non ci riusciamo. Per fortuna, l'uomo si distrae facilmente (TR 269).

The Copernican crisis is an enduring one. It is about the perennial reluctance of human beings to accept the existence of realities beyond their own. In the post-Copernican world, they become one thing amongst many, are thrust into time, multifariousness and chaos. Instead of eternal Truth and a fixed state of affairs they are faced with flux, evolution, relativity and uncertainty. The expulsion from the centre destroys their confidence that the way they live and experience the world is the only and absolute way.

In defying common sense and the evidence of the senses, Copernicus makes his fellows aware of the limitations of the human mind. Humans are forced to see themselves as puppets subject to invisible, impersonal processes and incapable of knowing the 'whole' of which they are an ephemeral part. Copernicus shows human perception to be flawed and consequently that reality and truth are inaccessible.

Mattia Pascal makes the point that it is difficult to carry on in the knowledge of the misperceived, insignificant and ephemeral nature of all the things which make up human life. Copernicus deprives us of our motivation. Mattia Pascal can only write a book about his life in good faith if he includes a preface which states his awareness of his smallness. "Non mi par piú tempo questo, di scriver libri, neppure per ischerzo." The

enlightened post-Copernican can never take himself seriously nor participate wholeheartedly in a society which places man at the centre of the universe.

dimentichiamo spesso e volentieri di essere atomi infinitesimali per rispettarci e ammirarci a vicenda, e siamo capaci di azzuffarci per un pezzettino di terra o di dolerci di certe cose, che, ove fossimo veramente compenetrati di quello che siamo, dovrebbero parerci miserie incalcolabili (TR 269).

Turning to Ionesco's work, we see exactly the same conflict existing in his personal experience and forming the roots of his art. He gives accounts of his own loss of centre crisis in several of his books of interviews and notes. His lost centre is his childhood world. As a child Ionesco spent some time at La Chapelle-Anthenaise, a small village in the Mayenne. There he experienced 'Paradise', a feeling of wholeness, certainty, beauty and harmony: "tout était joie et tout était présence" (JM 13). He felt that he was a fixed, unchanging centre around which turned time, the seasons and objects.

c'était le monde qui tournait autour de moi: le temps était une roue, oui, qui tournait autour de moi qui me sentais immuable, éternel; j'étais le centre du monde; hélas, une force centrifuge m'a poussé dans la ronde, dans le temps (ECB 15).

It was the discovery of Death and Time which threw him out of the centre. At first he experienced the world of objects as mobile and changing regularly with the seasons - "C'est comme si les choses s'éloignaient, revenaient, et que moi je ne bougeais pas:..." (ECB 15). After his discovery he was aware of being subject to change himself, "hors de mon immuabilité parmi les choses qui vont et viennent et qui s'en vont" (JM 13). But with this new awareness of ephemerality and the vanity of human affairs, matter became relatively speaking more fixed and objects took on their statuesque solidity:

Pire, c'est moi qui tout d'un coup eus le sentiment que les choses restaient et que je m'en éloignais. A quinze ans, seize, c'était fini, j'étais dans le temps, dans la fuite, et dans le fini. Le présent avait disparu, il n'y eut plus pour moi qu'un passé et

qu'un demain, un demain senti déjà comme un passé (JM 13).

So began a lifetime of anguish, a sense of exile and nostalgia for the lost paradise of childhood. Ionesco's work is an attempt to come to terms with the experience of transience and the knowledge of mortality.

J'essaye depuis, tous les jours, de m'accrocher à quelque chose de stable, j'essaye désespérément de retrouver un présent, de l'installer, de l'élargir. Je voyage pour retrouver un monde intact sur lequel le temps n'aurait pas de prise (JM 13).

The second "premesse" in Il fu Mattia Pascal may be read as a premissa to the entire Pirandellian opus. Mattia Pascal cites the need to value the ephemera of life as the pretext for writing his story at all, at the same time dismissing its importance and explaining the ironic style as the effect of Copernican enlightenment, the perspective which four years later in L'umorismo was to be defined as humorism itself. Ionesco points to the crisis as the origin of his work and a central event and enduring problem in his life.

This thesis will be seeking to suggest that the loss of centre motif is central to the vision and art of both authors in more ways than their explicit comments on it imply. They see human beings as possessing a need for unity but as condemned to live in a world characterised by disunity and fragmentation. Their writings emanate from this shared vision but manifest it in a variety of ways, some of which they share.

Both authors evince their awareness of living and writing in a decentred culture and era of history; the loss of centre crisis constitutes an element in their plots which can serve a variety of thematic interests or emphases. The level on which the crisis takes place varies: it may be an existential dilemma involving the most radical metaphysical doubt; it may be a personal identity crisis in which the character confronts the disunity within himself either on an interiorised or a physical level, or simply in terms of his relationships with other people. The dilemma has social and

political manifestations too: both authors are acute observers of the dynamics of human situations when the realities and needs of the individual face those of the rest of society.

Both are preoccupied by the ways in which people attempt to centre and unify their lives in a fragmented world. Both concentrate on the moment in which the unified reality breaks up and the new one emerges. But they are not interested in depicting the psychological trauma of that event. They may focus on the urge to unity itself. They also analyse the tools which human beings use to unify the world – the processes of consciousness, language and reason. Furthermore, the impulse to unity is seen to control the application of these tools: system-building, fanaticism, conformism, dogmatism, totalitarianism are all types of absolutism which come under their scrutiny.

In both authors there is evidence of a kind of proseletysing compulsion to reveal to the audience the fragmented nature of the world in an attempt to expose them to the reality which lies beyond the commonly accepted one. The Copernican crisis is here being implemented, not merely described.

Their exposure of fragmentation is double. On the one hand they show that the universe and the human condition itself are incompatible with the desire for unity. They also show that the ways in which we try to create unity for ourselves are doomed to failure because the tools (or 'forms' as Pirandello would call them) are inadequate on all levels. They show that fragmentation is actually aggravated by the workings of reason, language and system-building.

In the works of both we find attempts to communicate an alternative perspective, that of the secret life of the mind – dreams, obsessions, memories, irrational impulses. Their treatment of what lies beyond the everyday and conventional extends to the metaphysical 'beyond'. In this

case the experience of the loss of a centre ceases to be a crisis and becomes something in the order of a religious or mystical experience. There are furthermore, many ways in which the all-pervasive sense of loss of centre affects the discourse of these writers and is apparent in their adaptation of literary and dramatic form. Mention has already been made of the ironic vein of Il fu Mattia Pascal. In the theatre for example, both recognise that the need for unity plays a role in the reception or consumption of their art, and some of their work is therefore constructed to play on or frustrate that need in order to make us more aware of its promptings.

There is then an apparent paradox in their work: they satirise absolutism in the name of a quest for an Absolute. It is the relationship between the parody of social form on the one hand and the exploration of religious experience on the other, which is the focus of the main body of this thesis.

II The Copernican Crisis of the Twentieth Century

In their comments on the society and 'consciousness' of their time, Pirandello and Ionesco both suggest that fragmentation is the central feature. They are of course not alone in lamenting the alienation, mechanisation and chaos of their times. A striking feature of a number of accounts of the emergence of a new consciousness is that the change is seen to be as sudden and overwhelming as a loss of centre. "On or about December 1910 human nature changed ..." wrote Virginia Woolf. "It was in 1915 the old world ended", is the claim of D.H. Lawrence.³

Historically speaking though, science had been gradually undermining the theocentric view of life since the time of Copernicus, but up until the end of the nineteenth century Western culture managed to keep itself mentally at the centre of the universe in the keeping of a loving God. But the end of the nineteenth century saw such immense and rapid progress in physical science and technology that the results were visibly altering the conditions of daily life and work. Pirandello's novel Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore evinces a profound awareness of the practical effects of modern science.

Pirandello evokes the confusion of the modern consciousness as early as 1893 in Arte e coscienza d'oggi where he refers clearly to the 'decentering' effect of recent scientific thought and talks of "il tramonto d'un'intera concezione religiosa, politica e filosofica" (SPSV 904):

Malinconico posto però questo che la scienza ha assegnato all'uomo nella natura, in confronto almeno a quello ch'egli s'imaginava in altri tempi di tenervi... Era un giorno la terra l'ombelico d'una sconfinata creazione. Tutto il cielo, il sole, gli astri s'aggiravan continuamente intorno a lei, quasi per offrirle uno spettacolo e farle lume di e notte (SPSV 895).

Science has offend^d_^ed the "orgoglio umano che vuol farsi centro dell'universo". It is difficult for people living in the secular culture of the late twentieth century to conceive the unifying effect which religious

belief had on society. Every level of life from the individual to the state was in theory directed by the same force.⁴ In his essay Pirandello describes the "straordinaria mobilità" which the death of god had on life. In a relative world no viewpoint can be taken for granted. "nessuno piú riesce a stabilirsi un punto di vista fermo e incrollabile" (SPSV 901). The result for Pirandello, is an all-pervasive fragmentation:

Non mai, credo, la vita nostra eticamente ed esteticamente fu piú disgregata. Slegata, senz'alcun principio di dottrina e di fede, i nostri pensieri turbinano entro i fati attuosì, che stan come nembi sopra una rovina. Da ciò, a parer mio, deriva per la massima parte il nostro malessere intellettuale (SPSV 901).

He sees his contemporaries as suffering from Pyrrhonism, frenetically trying out all sorts of replacement beliefs but not knowing which way to turn:

Nei cervelli e nelle coscienze regna una straordinaria confusione. In questo specchio interiore si riflettono le piú disparate figure, tutte però in iscomposte attitudini;... A chi dare ascolto, a chi appligiarsi? L'insistenza d'un consiglio vince per un momento la voce d'ogni altro; e noi ci abbandoniamo un tratto a lui con la morbosa impulsività di chi vuol trovare uno scampo e non sa dove ... ci sentiamo come smarriti, anzi perduti in un cieco, immenso labirinto, circondato tutt'intorno da un mistero impenetrabile. Di vie, ce ne son tante: quale sarà la vera? ... Qual criterio direttivo seguire? Nessuno osa percorrere fino in fondo la sua via, ci fermiamo a metà, ci volgiamo indietro a guardar gli altri, e il dubbio ci viene alle labbra: E s'io sbaglio? (SPSV 900)

Everyone is waiting for the new religion to appear. Until it does they fling themselves into various strategies and beliefs. The era is characterised, says Pirandello, not only by the number of beliefs but also by the speed with which they are embraced and rejected:

Aspettiamo, e invano, purtroppo, che sorga finalmente qualcuno ad annunziarci il verbo nuovo. E intanto ci volgiamo ora a questo, ora a quel banditore, che berciando con enfasi molta, promette mari e monti, e nulla ottiene naturalmente. Da ciò il sorgere improvviso delle piú bizzarre baracche in questa internazionale fiera della follia; caselli di sabbia, cui il menomo soffio atterra; glorie improvvisate, che durano un giorno come i giornali; mode, scuole, combriccole, sorte travolte e scomparse in un momento. Ieri il realismo e il naturalismo, oggi il simbolismo e il misticismo, domani chi sa che cosa (SPSV 901).

The essay concludes with an evocation of modern consciousness as a "battaglia notturna", "una mischia disperata", and with an apocalyptic vision of devastation followed by a return to unity:

Siamo certamente alla vigilia d'un enorme avvenimento. E sorgerà forse anche adesso il genio che stendendo l'anima alla tempesta che appressa, al mare che dilagherà rompendo ogni argine e ingojando le rovine, creerà il libro unico, secolare, come in altri tempi è avvenuto (SPSV 906).

In Il fu Mattia Pascal Pirandello adds a further feature to his vision of modern consciousness, in Paleari's rather contrived 'aside' in Chapter XII. The image of the puppet who perceives the tear in the paper sky essentially embodies the loss of centre experience but the emphasis here is on the effect it has on belief and action. It demonstrates that human reality is constructed and illusory, and that an awareness of this artificiality deprives us of the power to believe in our perceptions and systems in any absolute way.

Oreste rimarrebbe terribilmente sconcertato da quel buco nel cielo. ... e si sentirebbe cader le braccia. Oreste, insomma, diventerebbe Amleto. Tutta la differenza, signor Meis, fra la tragedia antica e la moderna consiste in ciò, creda pure: in un buco nel cielo di carta (TR 383-4).

Orestes, classical man, believes in his passions, but Hamlet, the first modern man, doubts the reality of his emotions and the value of actions. In this passage Pirandello characterises the modern consciousness as aware of its own factitious nature.

Ionesco too gives voice to the Pyrrhonistic dilemma of lacking a single 'given' belief:

Toutes les voies sont bonnes. En tout cas, toutes sont connues, analysées, expliquées: nous les avons là, devant nous, sur un plateau, comme des pâtisseries.... Il s'agit d'en suivre une jusqu'au bout. Il faut n'en choisir qu'une. Moi je les choisis toutes, mais comme je ne peux pas les suivre toutes à la fois je n'en adopte qu'une à la fois, bien sûr pour deux minutes, puis je change d'avis, je choisis l'autre, puis je choisis le troisième et ainsi de suite. Alors, je suis bien embarrassé (JM 102).⁵

Much of Ionesco's comment on the modern world focuses on the tendency of

science to emphasise reason and to address itself to the material, physical world. He argues that such an approach has proved incapable of solving the metaphysical problems which he sees as being more important than any others. Science describes the world and the laws of nature but can give no *raison d'être* for them.

Toutes les philosophies, toutes les sciences n'ont pas pu nous donner les clefs du mystère.... Je peux connaître les lois: je ne peux pas connaître la raison des lois.... Je déclare que le savoir est inutile. Je déclare que les sciences ne pénètrent pas l'essence de l'être.... La connaissance est impossible. Mais je ne peux pas me résigner à ne connaître que les murs de la prison (JM 44-6).

Living later in the twentieth century than Pirandello, Ionesco's view of the modern consciousness naturally has a different emphasis. He is in a position to see the long-term results of intellectual 'mobility' and the mechanisation of work. Ionesco is old enough to remember what life was like in a rural community:

Là, tout était plus petit, plus à l'échelle humaine. Le village était un cosmos, à la fois le nid et l'espace, la solitude nécessaire et la communauté. Ce n'était pas un monde limité, c'était un monde complet. Tout le monde, toutes choses avaient un visage. La religion avait un visage, c'était le curé. L'autorité avait un visage, c'était le maire, c'était le garde-champêtre.... Tout était personnalisé, concret (ECB 17).

There each element of society could be seen functioning in terms of individuals not abstracts or institutions. At the same time the individual is greater than his job or role: "cependant l'on dissociait très bien la fonction de la personne" (ECB 17). But nowadays the individual subsumes himself in his social role.

Maintenant, ce qui est ennuyeux dans la société, c'est que la personne se confond avec la fonction, ou plutôt, la personne est tentée de s'identifier totalement à la fonction; ce n'est pas la fonction qui prend un visage, c'est un homme qui se déshumanise, qui perd son visage (ECB 17).

Ionesco identifies a further source of dehumanisation in modern society in the growth of the mass media who manipulate the intellectual rootlessness: "c'est l'odieuse propagande, la maladie de notre temps" (NCN

216). Although he is aware that language has an innate tendency to 'decay' or lose touch with reality, he claims that politicians deliberately misuse words in order to control people: "Cette crise du langage est le plus souvent artificielle, volontaire. La propagande a bouleversé consciemment la signification des mots pour jeter le trouble dans les esprits. C'est une méthode de guerre moderne" (NCN 9). In a godless world human beings make the mistake of treating political ideology and dogma as objective truth. By centering their lives in purely material solutions they cut themselves off from their spiritual dimension. Ionesco believes that we are essentially metaphysical creatures and that repressed metaphysical nostalgia actually causes violence.

The non-metaphysical world of today has destroyed all mystery; and the so-called "scientific" theatre of the period, the theatre of politics and propaganda, anti-poetic and academic, has flattened mankind out, alienating the unfathomable third dimension which makes a whole man.⁶

In a world where death has no meaning it becomes a source of terror. Ionesco believes that this terror causes violence: the murderer kills death when killing other people.⁷ Whereas Pirandello attributes modern chaos to loss of a religious belief, Ionesco points to materialism as a cause. It is not simply that there is no God but rather that people have lost touch with the fundamental truths of human existence: "les vérités premières sont justement ce que l'on perd de vue, ce que l'on oublie. Voilà pourquoi l'on arrive à la confusion et pourquoi l'on ne s'entend plus" (NCN 70).⁸

III The Copernican Universe

Although both Pirandello and Ionesco identify a particularly modern crisis, they recognise too that its causes are rooted in non-historical factors such as the way the human mind functions and the way language and reason process reality. As Ionesco puts it: "il y aura division tant qu'il y aura vie. L'univers est en crise perpétuelle" (NCN 313).

i) Pirandello

The basis of the Pirandellian cosmos is an essence or force which he usually calls 'vita' but which is sometimes called 'Essere'. This essence has vitalistic nuances, as in 'life force', but sometimes carries a more spiritual connotation – 'Essere' suggests an immaterial world spirit of which everything is ultimately a part. This essence is characterised by anarchic, irrational change and flux: "la vita è flusso continuo, incandescente e indistinto" ("La trappola", NA I 682). Human beings are tiny fragments of this life flood, endowed with rigid physical form and consciousness. Although they are a part of that flux all their lives, they are prevented from being aware of this by consciousness or self-awareness. It is this which cuts them off from the rest of the natural world and its main quality is to make them 'feel themselves live'.

Perché la prima radice del nostro male è appunto in questo sentimento che noi abbiamo della vita. L'albero vive e non si sente: per lui la terra, il sole, l'aria, la luce, il vento, la pioggia, non sono cose che esso non sia. All'uomo, invece, nascendo è toccato questo triste privilegio di sentirsi vivere, con la bella illusione che ne risulta: di prendere cioè come una realtà fuori di sé questo suo interno sentimento della vita, mutabile e vario. (SPSV 155)₉

To possess consciousness means to project an inner reality onto the world outside. In both L'umorismo and Il fu Mattia Pascal Pirandello represents this as a light – in the former the Promethean fire, in the latter "un lanternino che ciascuno di noi porta in sé acceso" (TR 397). This lamp throws light out into the darkness of life around us but rather than being

a comfort to us, it is the source of all our woe. For the light only shows up the darkness beyond its range. Without the light we would not even be aware of the darkness. It is the source of an entirely false reality which we hypostatise.

Essa ci fa vedere sperduti su la terra; essa proietta tutt' intorno a noi un cerchio piú o meno ampio di luce, di là dal quale è l'ombra nera, l'ombra paurosa che non esisterebbe, se la favilla non fosse accesa in noi; ombra che noi però dobbiamo purtroppo creder vera, fintanto che quella ci si mantiene viva in petto (SPSV 155).

Human life in Pirandello's vision is pervaded by illusion. The only comfort of this is the suggestion that death becomes a return to a homeland. Although this gives us a life after death, it nevertheless provides no *raison d'être* for our brief and tormented sojourn in a physical form.

Se la morte fosse soltanto il soffio che spegne in noi questo sentimento penoso, pauroso, perché limitato, definito da questo cerchio d'ombra fittizia oltre il breve ambito dello scarso lume che ci proiettiamo attorno, e in cui la vita nostra rimane come imprigionato, come esclusa per alcun tempo dalla vita universale, eterna, nella quale ci sembra che dovremo un giorno rientrare, mentre già ci siamo e sempre vi rimarremo, ma senza piú questo sentimento di esilio che ci angoscia? (SPSV 155).

However, the manner in which consciousness operates, creates a second kind of exile in Pirandello's view. In his influential essay of 1923, Studi sul teatro contemporaneo, Adriano Tilgher points out "il motivo fondamentale che sottostà a tutta l'opera di Pirandello e le dà una ferrea unità e organicità di visione".¹⁰ He describes it as "Dualismo della Vita e della Forma o Costruzione; necessità per la Vita di calarsi in una Forma ed impossibilità di esaurirvisi".¹¹ For Pirandello the human mind is a producer of forms, by means of which it attempts to impose unity and stability on reality: "La vita è un flusso continuo che noi cerchiamo d'arrestare, di fissare in forme stabili e determinate, dentro e fuori di noi, ..." (SPSV 151). The most basic human impulse acts in opposition both to the nature of reality and of ourselves. To be human is to produce form,

to yearn for fixity and stability and to hate change. "Ogni forma è la morte" (NA 1 682). Even worse, we take these forms to be solid, absolute realities when they are constructions, "un inganno della nostra mente":

Manca affatto alla nostra conoscenza del mondo e di noi stessi quel valore obiettivo che comunemente presumiamo di attribuirle. È una costruzione illusoria continua (SPSV 146).

What we tend to think of as reality is man-made and imposed on the world.

"Non esiste alcuna realtà se non quella che ci diamo noi" (NA 1 681).

Participating in this form-making process is "una certa macchinetta infernale" - logic. Pirandello imagines this to be a kind of filter pump connecting the brain with the heart. Its raw material is the already illusory "sentimento che noi abbiamo della vita" - our warm, tumultuous feelings. These it cools, purifies and 'idealises' - "i-de-a-liz-za" - (meaning here to turn into ideas and abstracts). In this fashion, logic distances us from life even further.

L'uomo non ha della vita un'idea, una nozione assoluta, bensì un sentimento mutabile e vario, secondo i tempi, i casi, la fortuna. Ora la logica, astraendo dai sentimenti le idee, tende appunto a fissare quel che è mobile, mutabile, fluido; tende a dare un valore assoluto a ciò che è relativo. E aggrava un male già grave per se stesso (SPSV 154-5).

Pirandello here paints a portrait of a creature immured in an artificial reality, burdened with impulses and a mind which set it at odds with the world it has to inhabit. Periodically the provisional and false character of what is taken for an absolute reality is revealed because the life-force is stronger than the forms which obscure it from view.

Le forme, in cui cerchiamo d'arrestare, di fissare in noi questo flusso continuo, sono i concetti, sono gli ideali a cui vorremmo serbarci coerenti, tutte le finzioni che ci creiamo, le condizioni, lo stato in cui tendiamo a stabilirci. Ma dentro di noi stessi, in ciò che noi chiamiamo anima, e che è la vita in noi, il flusso continua, indistinto, sotto gli argini, oltre i limiti che noi imponiamo, componendoci una coscienza, costruendoci una personalità. In certi momenti tempestosi, investite dal flusso, tutte quelle nostre forme fittizie crollano miseramente; e anche quello che non scorre sotto gli argini e oltre i limiti, ma che si scopre a noi distinto e che noi abbiamo con cura incanalato nei nostri affetti, nei doveri che ci siamo imposti, nelle abitudini

che ci siamo tracciate, in certi momenti di piena straripa e sconvolge tutto (SPSV 151-2).

This passage gives some of the manifestations of the form-making impulse – concepts, ideals, personality, love of stability and coherence, duty, habit. The association of fixity and construction (stabili, determinate, arrestare, fissare, coerenti, componere, costruire) with falsity (finzioni) is typically Pirandellian. It is important to note that the idea of falsity has no moral connotation. Pirandello is not accusing us of hypocrisy. The "finzioni" are not just for the 'social' surfaces of life but are "dentro e fuori di noi". They are the very material of human reality and identity. As Enrico IV puts it: "Nessuno di noi mente o finge. – C'è poco da dire: ci siamo fissati tutti in un bel concetto di noi stessi" (MN I 325).

However, forms are not just the natural product of consciousness. In another passage in L'umorismo Pirandello describes how this reality which we weave around ourselves and all our forms "sono un nostro inganno per vivere e che sotto c'è qualcos'altro, a cui l'uomo non può affacciarsi, se non a costo di morire o d'impazzire" (SPSV 153). In Pirandello's world the needs of the human psyche are incompatible with the conditions in which it must live.

ii) Ionesco

Whereas it is possible to point to specific passages in Pirandello's work which offer self-contained descriptions of the universe as he sees it, in Ionesco's case there is no single system expounded. Rather, he returns again and again in his notebooks and journals to conjecture about the universe, approaching the problem largely through his own feelings. For Ionesco too human life is an exile from something vital, but unlike Pirandello he does not posit exactly from what: "Nous sommes aliénés, c'est sûr, mais non pas seulement par notre société" (ANT 209). His fundamental

feeling is of not belonging, not being at home in the world. "Nous ne nous sentons pas bien ici, nous ne nous sentons pas chez nous" (JM 146). "Je ne me sens pas tout à fait appartenir au monde" (NCN 17).

The basic characteristic of life for Ionesco is also flux but primarily in the sense of the passing of time: the continuous process of the future becoming the past, the ageing and mortality of humankind. It is not a vitalistic notion but rather the more traditional one of the vanity and caducity of all mortal things. He frequently underlines that his view of the world is not new or original: "Mais je ne fais que répéter ce que disait le roi Salomon: tout est vanité, tout retourne en poussière, tout n'est que des ombres" (NCN 197).

The imperative to make sense of life, to give it a meaning is just as urgent as in Pirandello's world and for the same reasons: "Il n'y a vraisemblablement rien à comprendre. Mais il faut se faire une raison, trouver ses raisons. Ou perdre la raison" (JM 169). He has spent all his life trying to find a stable reality which is not an illusion of the mind. He refuses constructions and will only be satisfied by a 'given', transcendent absolute. He is afflicted in an extreme way by the need to fix the flux of life. Instead of the relentless passing of time, experience should be "présent, présence, plénitude" (JM 29).

Pour moi, c'est comme si l'actualité du monde était à tout moment parfaitement inactuelle. Comme s'il n'y avait rien; comme si le fond des choses n'était rien, ou comme s'il nous échappait. Une seule actualité, pourtant; le déchirement continu du voile de l'apparence; la destruction continuelle de tout ce qui se construit (NCN 196-7).

The conflict in Ionesco's work is essentially the same as in Pirandello's: between the human desire for stability and absolutes and the changing, multiple nature of reality. But whereas Pirandello allows his characters to shelter from the unbearable behind fixed masks and forms, Ionesco refuses any compromise. He exists in a kind of limbo or stalemate because

he knows that all human reality is a construction or illusion over the real nature of reality and yet he can see no alternative on which to centre his hopes.

Ionesco's view of the nature of forms is identical to Pirandello's. Reality is a projection of the mind: "toute connaissance, toute rencontre de moi et du monde est projection de moi dans cette matière qu'est le monde, projection, c'est-à-dire figure, forme, architecture" (JM 185). It is the nature of form to be detached from that which it is supposed to embody or express and to form a self-contained 'crust' around the raw material of reality. Speaking of his portrait of language, he says "je constate ... son usure naturelle; je constate encore son automatisation qui fait que le langage se sépare de la vie; je conçois donc qu'il ne faut pas tellement le réinventer que le rétablir" (NCN 9). Instead of exposing reality, words hide it and distract attention from it. "Les mots ont tué les images ou ils les cachent. Une civilisation de mots, une civilisation égarée. Les mots créent la confusion. Les mots ne sont pas la parole" (JM 88). This separation of form from some kind of fundamental reality means that human emotions and actions are always working through a flawed medium. "Tous les systèmes partent de la réalité qui est amorphe et s'en éloignent" (PPPP 67). Like Pirandello, Ionesco associates form with death:

En effet par la force même des choses, dès qu'un régime est installé, il est dépassé. Dès qu'une forme d'expression est connue, elle est déjà périmée. Une chose dite est déjà morte, la réalité est au-delà d'elle (NCN 77).

Ionesco also recognises that reason reduces the fullness of reality, simplifying and turning it into something entirely new. As for Pirandello, logic "absolutise le relatif" (ECB 121). For Ionesco it is vital to evade the masking effect of form. He is dogged by a dream of a wall with a closed door. He feels the need to scale the wall and yet also the impossibility of doing so. He sees the wall as that of his prison. He is separ-

ated from a community, from knowledge and truth, from his innermost self. The image of the wall therefore emblematises his decentred, fragmented state perfectly and recurs in his work. Even though he prefers to live turned towards the void in the hope that the mystery of human existence will be resolved, he sometimes suspects, like Pirandello, that beyond the vain forms of reason lies nothing:

Ces murs qui s'élèvent, ces murs impénétrables que je m'acharne à vouloir trouer ou abattre ne sont peut-être que la raison. La raison a élevé ces murs pour nous préserver du chaos, car derrière ces murs, c'est le chaos, c'est le néant. Il n'y a rien derrière les murs. Ils sont la frontière entre ce que nous avons réussi à faire de ce monde et le vide. De l'autre côté c'est la mort. Ne pas franchir ces murs (JM 178-9).

Yet if both writers explicitly aim to take their audiences and readers beyond the walls of man-made reality, to show them their fragility and facticity, it is because both perceive that it is not the irremediable impulse to form per se that is the worst of evils, but rather the misuse of form which results when the need for unity leads us to elevate forms into huge monolithic, rigid systems with which we expect to solve all our problems. Both writers are provoked by the spectacle of the cruelty which human beings inflict on one another when the inadequacy of form combines with their thirst for absolutes. Not only do we tend to make one form the basis of our whole lives but we then try to impose it on other people. The suggestion is present in both that the desire for unity leads to intolerance and arrogance, racism and dogmatism. In our desire for a single, eternal belief which will embrace all of life and all of society, we unquestioningly let forms rigidify into traditions, clichés, duty, conventions and habits, forgetting that change and multiplicity are the nature of reality and that forms themselves must change. This clinging to forms and the conformist instinct is what Ionesco calls 'bourgeois' because politically speaking it is a reactionary stance:

Ce qui était vrai hier, ce qui était une découverte intellectuelle

est dépassé, mais la cristallisation sociale et psychologique maintient solidement, dans une tradition desséchée, les vérités devenues des conformismes pétrifiés, commodité, aveuglement, surdité. Nous savons que tout a tendance à s'embourgeoiser, ceci est particulièrement évident pour les révolutions (NCN 24).

It is the tendency for words and insights to degenerate into clichés, slogans and 'idées reçues', and for systems of thought to become worshipped as ideologies with which Ionesco in particular is concerned.

IV Pirandello's Dramatic Presentation of the Role of 'Forms'

i) Identity: "Ciascuno a suo modo" and "Enrico IV"

A quest for a unified self or personality is a frequent subject in Pirandello's work, though his analysis is deeper than the cliché 'identity crisis' suggests. He does not in fact use the word 'identity' or 'personality' but "coscienza", which in Italian means both 'consciousness' and 'conscience' – an ambiguity which Pirandello deepens by associating "coscienza" with 'identity'. "Coscienza" is constructed out of all the "anime" within us, and which in L'umorismo are defined as "la vita in noi" (SPSV 151).

L'ordine? la coerenza? Ma se noi abbiamo dentro quattro, cinque anime in lotta fra loro: l'anima istintiva, l'anima morale, l'anima affettiva, l'anima sociale? E secondo che domina questa o quella, s'atteggia la nostra coscienza; e noi riteniamo valida e sincera quella interpretazione fittizia di noi medesimi, del nostro essere interiore che ignoriamo, perché non si manifesta mai tutt'intero, ma ora in un modo, ora in un altro, come volgono i casi della vita (SPSV 157).

When his characters confront the fluidity of their "coscienza" it is essentially their very perception and experience of reality which is undermined. This happens notably in Ciascuno a suo modo and Non si sa come.

In Ciascuno a suo modo the radical natural of the 'identity' crisis is not only the subject of discussion but is conveyed to the audience through the metatheatrical mise-en-abîme^u of the play's structure. In the "primo intermezzo corale", this onslaught on the audience's cosy, unified world is made explicit when Pirandello has one of the spectators remark that one of the effects of his plays is the disturbing revelation of what lies beyond the banal and everyday:

Quando venite ad ascoltare le commedia degli altri autori, vi abbandonate sulla vostra poltrona, vi disponete ad accogliere l'illusione che la scena vi vuol creare, se riesce a crearvela! Quando venite invece ad ascoltare una commedia di Pirandello,

afferrate con tutte e due le mani i braccioli della poltrona, così, vi mettete - così - con la testa come pronta a cozzare, a respingere a tutti i costi quel che l'autore vi dice. Sentite una parola qualunque - che so? "sedia" - ah perdio, senti? ha detto "sedia"; ma a me non me la fa! Chi sa che cosa ci sarà sotto a codesta sedia! (MN I 161).

The efforts of the characters in the inner play to rationalise their inconsistencies are paralleled by similar efforts in the 'mock' audience - some of whom are supposedly the 'real' people whose drama is being enacted. In this fashion Pirandello makes his audience conscious of itself as perceiving subjects. Paradoxically, he breaks the dramatic illusion and distances the audience ("gli spettatori saranno anch'essi respinti a loro volta in un terzo piano," [MN I 155]) in order to involve them more closely in the action of the play.

The nature of the play as a drama of perception is established by the two opening unconnected scenes. The first begins with a young man asking "Ma che ne pensa lei?" (MN I 127) The audience is given no idea what the subject of the conversation is. Unable to follow the content, it is obliged to consider the way in which the characters talk. In the second scene the same technique directs their attention to the characters' desire for certainty, knowledge and stability.

E come sono? Non lo so più! Ti giuro che non lo so più! Tutto mobile, labile, senza peso. Mi volto di qua, di là, rido; m'apparto in un angolo per piangere. Che smania! Che angoscia! E continuamente mi nascondo la faccia, davanti a me stessa, tanto mi vergogno a vedermi cambiare! (MN I 129).

Delia Morello echoes this despair on her first entry: "Mi stringo e non mi sento. Le mani - me le guardo - non mi sembrano mie. E tutte le cose - Dio mio, le cose da fare - non so più perché si debbano fare" (MN I 145). The revelation of her fluidity and her failure to rationalise her behaviour have completely disorientated her. She can no longer tell what is true or false, and suffers a paralysing crisis of motivation. This leads to a desire for some kind of purity or a 'given' absolute reality,

independent of all constructions. Her very awareness of this need implies the impossibility of its realisation:

... ormai, a rifarla in noi, attorno a noi, la semplicità, appare falsa - appare? è, è - falsa, finta anch'essa. - Non è più vero niente! E io voglio vedere, voglio sentire almeno una cosa, almeno una cosa sola che sia vera, vera, in me! (MN I 147).

The frenetic searching of the characters for certainty and explanations contrasts with the 'subversive' activities of Diego Cinci who, as fast as the people around him build up their security, undermines it by exposing it as illusory because based on a false notion of the unity of the mind. He says we think of "coscienza" as possessing precise limits whereas it is in fact "una rete elastica".¹² Rather than being fixed and accessible to us, it is constantly fluctuating, random and multilevelled.¹³ Within it there are processes going on of which we are unaware but which control our behaviour.¹⁴ Shameful acts, "Menzogne vergognose, cupi livori, delitti meditati" lie dormant in it for years only to suddenly surface and terrify us with another side of ourselves. Just as Pirandello, through the metaplay, relates the characters' desire for consistency to the audience's desire for fixed meanings, so Diego Cinci relates our notion of identity to the cultural institution of monogamous marriage:

Caro mio! Come ci sono i figli illegittimi, ci sono anche i pensieri bastardi! [...] Tende ognuno ad ammogliarsi per tutta la vita con un'anima sola, la più comoda, quella che ci porta in dote la facoltà più adatta a conseguire lo stato a cui aspiriamo; ma poi, fuori dell'onesto tetto coniugale della nostra coscienza, abbiamo tresche, tresche e trascorsi senza fine con tutte le altre nostre anime reiette che stanno giù nei sotterranei del nostro essere, e da cui nascono atti, pensieri, che non vogliamo riconoscere, o che, forzati, adottiamo o legittimiamo, con accomodamenti e riserve e cautele (MN I 141).

Diego Cinci's awareness has an obsessive and Ionescan quality in that he constantly returns to the images and settings associated with his discovery of the random fluidity within himself: the deathbed of his mother and the mortuary. But there is another aspect to this haunted and apparently cynical figure. Contrasting with the lugubrious tone of much of

his language is his sense of the beauty and authenticity of the moment when the life-force bursts through "coscienza" and reveals it as a construction:

- e che almeno è una gioja - una bella gioja spaventosa - quando, investiti dal flusso in un momento di tempesta, assistiamo al crollo di tutte quelle forme fittizie in cui s'era rappresa la nostra sciocca vita quotidiana; e sotto gli argini, oltre i limiti che ci eran serviti per comporci comunque una coscienza, per costruirci una personalità qualsiasi, vediamo anche quel tanto del flusso che non ci scorreva dentro ignoto, che ci si scopriva distinto perché lo avevamo incanalato con cura nei nostri affetti, nei doveri che ci eravamo imposti, nelle abitudini che ci eravamo tracciate, straripare in una magnifica piena vorticoso e sconvolgere e travolgere tutto. - Ah, finalmente! L'uragano, l'eruzione, il terremoto! (MN I 173).

The antithesis between those who, like Diego Cinci, find liberation in the irrational, and those who, like Delia Morello and Donna Livia Palegari, find it terrifying, runs through Pirandello's work and we will return to it in the context of mysticism in chapters two and three.

The loss of centre is here shown as possessing a double value. Although it destroys our reality, it offers the possibility of change because of the awareness it brings. So Diego Cinci advises his friends to detach themselves from the "pagliacetto che ti fabbrichi con l'interpretazione fittizia dei tuoi atti e dei tuoi sentimenti" and puts forward a notion of something within man which, no matter how ugly, must be faced. If it is denied it becomes "un dio terribile", but when accepted, it brings peace. It is suggested that by foregoing the factitious unity of identity, we gain a true unity, a oneness with the reality of our being.

Enrico IV

The two character types just described are perfectly fused in the figure of Enrico IV, and account for the state of limbo in which he exists. His perception that we miss the essence of life by holding onto "un bel concetto^{di} noi stessi" prefigures Ionesco's vision of man being so engrossed in the maintenance of his systems that he loses sight of his original

goal:

Monsignore, però, mentre voi vi tenete fermo, aggrappato con tutte e due le mani alla vostra tonaca santa, di qua, dalle maniche vi scivola, vi scivola, vi sguiscia come un serpe qualche cosa, di cui non v'accorgete. Monsignore, la vita! (MNI 325).

Ionescan too is his insight into the power of tradition and convention.

Even if everyone were to wipe the slate clean and start afresh, they would adopt the same masks and habits:

... uscite di qua, nel mondo vivo. Spunta il giorno. Il tempo è davanti a voi. Un'alba. Questo giorno che ci sta davanti - voi dite - lo faremo noi! - Sì? Voi? E salutatemi tutte le tradizioni! Salutatemi tutti i costumi! Mettetevi a parlare! Ripeterete tutte le parole che si sono sempre dette! Credete di vivere? Rimasticate la vita dei morti! (MN I 350).

While he shares the sinister vocabulary of Diego Cinci, there is an added sense of beauty which is calm and contemplative, as suggested in his enjoyment of the "magnifico quadro notturno" made by his companions in the moonlight (MN I 354). His example of the sleeping Irish priest woken by the touch of a flower on the chin is a reversal of the loss of centre or of Diego Cinci's "terremoto", but it nevertheless suggests the existence of an authentic, delightful world beyond the construction of identity.

Gli vidi aprir gli occhi ridenti; e tutta la bocca ridergli del riso beato del suo sogno; immemore: ma subito vi so dire che si ricompose rigido nel suo abito da prete e che gli ritornò negli occhi la stessa serietà che voi avete già veduta nei miei; perché i preti irlandesi difendono la serietà della loro fede cattolica con lo stesso zelo con cui io i diritti sacrosanti della monarchia ereditaria (MN I 368).

As the final remark indicates, the choice of an Irish priest was not entirely fortuitous; dogmatism is here associated with a narrow view of human consciousness. This is also an oblique comment on the behaviour of Mathilde and the doctor who have no conception of the relativity of their world.

Yet Enrico's sense of a Paradise behind the mask is offset by an awareness that living outside time, beyond form, entails facing terror and "La solitudine ... - così squallida e vuota". His understanding of the

need to retreat behind masks prompts him to urge his companions to value their illusions. He gives, in fact, the opposite advice to that of Diego Cinci:

Perché guai, guai se non vi tenete piú forte a ciò che vi par vero oggi, a ciò che vi parrà vero domani, anche se sia l'opposto di ciò che vi pareva vero jeri! (MN I 353).

But his nostalgia for the time when he was taken in by his own illusions is tempered by his experience of the harm which results when people attempt to impose their illusions on others. In the dual impossibility of returning to a oneness with "quest'[a] ... mascherata, continua, d'ogni minuto, di cui siamo i pagliacci involontarii", and of living without masks, the only answer is a conscious masquerade. The process by which awareness of the mask results in a parody of the masks worn in good faith is essentially the structure of Schlegel's "farsa trascendentale" as Pirandello defines it in L'umorismo: "una perpetua parodia".¹⁵

ii) Social form: "Pensaci Giacomino"

Pensaci Giacomino, written in 1917, deals with another aspect of not recognising the factitiousness and relativity of human constructions. Here the 'forms' scrutinised are moral precepts and the family, the absolutist urge to unity expressed in the context of social relationships.

The play is based on a paradox or reversal: the person who stands for Christian values is the least religious in terms of precepts and lifestyle. Toti expresses the Christian values of compassion, charity, and selfless love through non-Christian forms: the setting up of an open menage-à-trois. In doing so he exposes the non-absolute nature of forms. The townsfolk cannot see the moral intention behind Toti's acts because they see them in the context of a 'code' which identifies them as wrong. They are unaware that their perception is mediated by any code at all, and so make the system designed to embody certain values synonymous with those values. The issue is made explicit when Toti issues his challenge to the

headmaster in Act Two: "Aspetto che qualcuno - poiché lei non vuol farlo - venga a discutere con me non su quello che pare, ma su quello che ^è..." (MN II 297-8). Pirandello suggests here that true morality lies not in blind obedience to a priori abstract rules and conventional notions of "peccato mortale" but in following the solution prescribed by the dilemma. Human needs are given primacy over the rules of the code.¹⁶ The play constitutes a plea for a recognition of the inadequacy of systems and media.

The necessity of recognising that the one-dimensional nature of labels and names conflicts with the multi-dimensional nature of reality and of people is introduced early in the play. The context here is that of identity. An individual is not encompassed by his social role or profession. Professor Toti defends his taking of a young wife by using an example from the classroom. He explains to the headmaster how the pupils make fun of the profession of teacher not of the person exercising that profession. They perceive the distinction of the mask or form from the face:

Mi accorgo che lei ^è come tutti gli altri, allora; vede la professione e non vede l'uomo;...; s'inquieta come poco fa, credendo che i ragazzi diano la baja a me, mentre la danno al professore. Altro è la professione, altro è l'uomo. Fuori i ragazzi mi rispettano, mi baciano la mano. Qua fanno anch'essi la professione loro, di scolari, e per forza debbono dar la baja a chi fa quella di maestro e la fa come me, da povero vecchio stanco e seccato (MN II 276).

So if Toti takes a young wife and is cuckolded, it will not be he who wears the horns: "se n'andranno in testa alla mia professione di marito, che non mi riguarda se non per l'apparenza" (MN II 277). He will be showing clearly to the townsfolk how one's civic status in the eyes of the State (which will determine how his pension is paid) is an appearance not a solid reality.

All three acts of the play work up to encounters between Toti and the

'establishment'. At the end of Act One, it is Toti's compassion which stands out in contrast to the cruelty and hysteria of the parents bawling the clichés of Sicilian morality. They are surely the ancestors of the Smiths and Martins in Ionesco's La Cantatrice chauve.

The confrontation at the end of Act Two indicates that Pirandello held similar views to Ionesco about the tendency of human beings to base identity on only one of their many roles:

Cinquemani: ... Sono un pubblico funzionario; umile, sí, ma pubblico funzionario; e non me ne sono ancora dimenticato.

Toti: Lo vedo. Vi siete invece dimenticato d'esser padre
(MN II 307).

Here Cinquemani thinks of himself exclusively in terms of his public role, his position within a system. He values his public image and an abstract notion of the family over his duty to support his daughter.

Toti's aim is for directness, both of speech and act, but he continually comes up against the townsfolk's desire to avoid the real issue. Giacomino's sister will not come and discuss matters with Toti herself; she engages the services of Padre Landolina. She puts the Church between herself and the problem. This avoidance of directness is neatly symbolised in Act Three when Toti calls at her home: Toti must be addressed through the hole in the door, "Senza aprire la porta! Dalla spial" (MN II 318) Padre Landolina is explicitly identified with masking. Toti agrees to speak with him on condition that he removes his 'gloves' - "non dico dalle mani. Dalla lingua dico. Parli chiaro, insomma; aperto. Con me si parla cosí, perché non ho niente da nascondere, io. Aperto!" (MN II 309). Padre Landolina automatically assumes this request to be an insult to the Church, as though its self-confessed role were to conceal and obscure.

Like Ionesco, Pirandello understands the power of society's pressure on the individual to conform. Although Giacomino wanted to marry Lillina, he is prepared to forego his own happiness to uphold society's 'order'.

"Non comprende dunque da sé che certe cose si possono fare soltanto di nascosto, e non sono possibili alla vista di tutti, con lei che sa, con la gente che ride?" (MN II 326). Pirandello does not oversimplify the issue. He shows that Toti has to be as ruthless as his opponents in his pursuit of a moral solution. He is ultimately obliged to turn the very mechanisms he is fighting into instruments of coercion: if Giacomino marries another girl, Toti will reveal his past affair.

In Act Three the final reversal of terms comes over with the force of a blasphemy. With Padre Landolina crying "Peccato mortale" at the fleeing Giacomino, Toti wards the priest off like Jesus dismissing Satan. "Vade retro! Distruttore delle famiglie!" (MN II 329). His urging Giacomino not to turn round recalls Orpheus leading Eurydice from Hades – implying therefore that the Christian world of the priest is a Hell. In this play then, Pirandello is not calling for different values but for a recognition of forms and systems as 'media' capable of being altered and applied with discrimination.

iii) Unifying Life and Death: "La vita che ti diedi"

In Pensaci Giacomino Pirandello uses a variation of the Realist 'eternal triangle' theme to show how people resolve the conflicting dictates of their multiple roles by allowing one role to over-ride the others. Elsewhere he explores the problem with the help of some rather more outlandish plots.

In Il gioco delle parti, Il piacere dell'onestà, and La vita che ti diedi Pirandello creates a central character who flees from the fluidity of reality into a fixed world. Leone Gala in the first of those plays rejects instinct and attempts to live solely by his reason. Baldovino in the second play similarly attempts to quieten the 'beast' within himself and become a 'pure form' or abstract – a formal husband, like Toti, a husband in name only. Donn'Anna Luna in contrast to the latter two, tries to live

completely in a world of her own making and volition. In all these cases the privately constructed world is destroyed, not because of its personal nature (private truth, as Pirandello shows elsewhere, is all we have) but primarily because that world threatens the freedom of others. Leone's rigid world leads him into murder indirectly and it is shown that his world is in fact far from free of emotion. His logic was governed by the spirit of revenge. In Baldovino's case, his mania for form leads him to tyrannise over the people he is supposed to be serving.

La vita che ti diedi is one of Pirandello's most interesting and perhaps least discussed portraits of a search for unity. Whereas the earlier ones, Il giuoco delle parti and Il piacere dell'onestà can be seen to have clear roots in Realist drama (plots playing on the problems of adultery and social appearances) this later play has a more metaphysical 'frisson'. It takes a more universal theme – the passing of time, Death and the loss of loved ones – and uses this to investigate the nature of reality and consciousness. The play has a more expressionistic feel than its predecessors, focusing as it does on the clash between an individual's inner world and the outer world (both the reality of death and the demands of social reality). This is borne out by the description of Donn'Anna on her first entry:

Donn'Anna Luna, tutta bianca e come allucinata, avrà negli occhi una luce e sulle labbra una voce così "sue" che la faranno quasi religiosamente sola tra gli altri e le cose che la circondano. Sola e nuova. E questa sua "solitudine" e questa sua "novità" turberanno tanto più, in quanto si esprimeranno con una quasi divina semplicità, pur parlando ella come in un delirio lucido che sarà quasi l'alito tremulo del fuoco interiore che la divora e che si consuma così (MN I 457).

Her name of course, also suggests otherworldliness and the theme is present at another level with the hint of ghosts in the movement of some objects during a pause when the stage is empty. The stage direction remarks (for the reader only, of course) "(Chi sa che cose avvengono, non viste da

nessuno, nell'ombra delle stanze deserte dove qualcuno `è morto)" (MN I 479).

In this play Pirandello pushes to its extreme limits his notion that "cosí `è (se vi pare)" or that "Non esiste alcuna realtà se non quella che ci diamo noi" ("La Trappola", NA I 681). Donn'Anna tries to make her inner life equivalent to the whole of reality and the only criterion for defining reality. Reality is to be determined by personal belief, wishes and memory. She tries to overcome the dialectic between the individual and the others or external reality by simply discounting the 'other'. Through mere belief Donn'Anna eliminates the great divide between life and death, attempting to "passar sopra la morte" (MN I 464) as one character puts it. The play shows that such a strategy is perfectly feasible but only for a solitary person.

At the beginning it is Donn'Anna's solitude and isolation which are emphasised:

Donna Fiorina: Ma non esce di qua da piú di venti anni. Sempre a pensare, sempre a pensare. E a poco a poco s'è cosí... come alienata da tutto.

Don Giorgio: Eh, accogliere i pensieri che nascono dalla solitudine. `è male, `è male: vaporano dentro, nebbie di palude... (MN I 457).

Donn'Anna privileges memory over the material and ephemeral reality before her. She has spent so much time living in her mind that its reality is more real than the physical one represented by her dead son's body. Time had stopped still for her until his return. She is not just fighting death but all time and change. Even to notice how her sister has aged causes Donn'Anna great distress: "e vuoi che non mi sembri un sogno vederti ora cosí?" (MN I 460). As for Ionesco, time renders life unreal.

To Donn'Anna, as soon as something changes it becomes a different thing. "E cambiato non vuol dire un altro, da quello che era?" (MN I 461). She fails to reconcile the conflicting images of her son given to her by

her memory and his physical presence, so she solves the conflict and gives continuity to her experience by discounting the latter. If she felt her son to be alive during his seven years' absence, why should death make any difference?

The main gulf which Donn'Anna cannot bridge is that of her son's view of reality. Now that he is dead she cannot know how he experienced the world:

E che posso saperne io, della sua vita, com'era adesso per lui? delle cose, com'egli le vedeva; e quando le toccava, come le sentiva? - Ecco, vede? è così: quello che ci manca, ora, è solo quello che non sappiamo, che non possiamo sapere: la vita com'egli la dava a sé, a noi (MN I 462).

Yet paradoxically this gap is the very condition of her view of reality and of her son. If he had lived, she would have been obliged to revise her view of him and come to terms with change. Her reality depends on death, isolation and absence. The play illustrates Diego Cinci's assertion that "coscienza" would be adequate if we lived alone.

Donn'Anna's unified world collapses as soon as she confronts the reality of Lucia, her son's lover. Here is someone with a life ahead and family commitments who cannot be sustained on a reality constituted by wish-fulfilment. Once Donn'Anna comes up against the grief of Lucia and the demands of her ^{life}, she can no longer keep her illusion alive.

In the plays just examined we have seen that the problem of unity is explored in terms of the individual's relationship with his own multiplicity and with the private realities of other individuals: 'otherness' is both internal and external. "Gli altri" sounds out like a desperate refrain throughout Pirandello's work. "Ma c'è poi la situazione degli altri!" insists the Father in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore (MN I 73). Marco Mauri of Come prima, meglio di prima explains our interdependence:

C'è, oltre la nostra, cara zia Ernestina, c'è - anche quando vorremo che non ci fosse - c'è pure la vita degli altri! - Eh, come si fa!... Non possiamo chiuderci nella nostra, come se gli

altri non ci fossero!(MN I 829).

Whereas La vita che ti diedi shows the dangers inherent in the individual's right to create his own values, Vestire gli ignudi shows the opposite problem of "la vita degli altri, estranea ma presente, che frastorna, interrompe, intralcia, contraria, deforma ..." (MN I 854) and defends the right of individuals not to face the horror of their lives, as long as they harm no one else in the process.

The theme of 'otherness', whether private or social, is central in Ionesco's work too, but his treatment has an added dimension which may be attributed to his post-Holocaust awareness.

V Ionesco's Dramatic Presentation of the Role of Forms

i) "Rimasticate la vita dei morti!": "La Cantatrice chauve"

Until an actor's lapsus linguae gave La Cantatrice chauve its present title, Ionesco's first play was called an "antipièce", a name which now appears as a subtitle. Many of Ionesco's statements in his notebooks support the idea that he deliberately set out to systematically overturn the basic features of drama: "une vraie parodie de pièce, une comédie de la comédie" (NCN 252); "I was most concerned with solving purely theatrical problems".¹⁷ "Essai d'un théâtre abstrait ou non figuratif" (NCN 254). But his other accounts suggest that the play was also born of another, less conscious process, an encounter with the Méthode Assimil English course.¹⁸

As he copied phrases from his textbook, bizarre distortions occurred "insensiblement, contre ma volonté" which gradually led to the total disintegration of the text. The stilted politeness of the characters degenerated into a violent argument composed of fragments of sentences then fragments of words and finally mere noises:

Pour moi, il s'était agi d'une sorte d'effondrement du réel. Les mots étaient devenus des écorces sonores, dénuées de sens; les personnages aussi, bien entendu, s'étaient vidés de leur psychologie et le monde m'apparaissait dans une lumière insolite, peut-être dans sa véritable lumière, au-delà des interprétations et d'une causalité arbitraire (NCN 252).

The effect of this on the author was drastic - "j'étais pris d'un véritable malaise, de vertige, de nausées". In other words, he suffered a kind of loss of centre, the dissolution of his habitual view of reality.

It is this view of reality which is under scrutiny here rather than the ways in which Ionesco was dismantling theatrical form.¹⁹ In his early parodic plays, Ionesco, like Pirandello, was concerned to show how reality is limited, degraded and falsified by a blind faith in forms, such as

reason and language, and a love of habit and convention. But whereas Pirandello juxtaposes the irrational with the false 'unity' of form, Ionesco creates a grotesque parody of the constructed world. In Ciascuno a suo modo, Pirandello's view of form is explained in conceptual terms and is the subject of the dialogue. In La Cantatrice chauve, the same perceptions about form are conveyed less explicitly but more directly. Fragmentation is embedded in the play's text. The lack of correspondence between form and reality is not explained to the audience by a hyper-lucid commentator figure but happens right in front of them in as brutal a manner as possible.

L'auteur n'a pas à nous faire un discours sur la décomposition, extérieur à la décomposition, non révélateur; il doit suggérer, nous rendre présente cette décomposition de notre civilisation et de l'homme actuel, par les moyens de la décomposition, par un langage décomposé, des situations décomposées, c'est en cela qu'il y avait innovation, dans une technique de la déliquescence.²⁰

Pirandello tends to undermine conventional notions of reality through the plot, over the space of a whole play, often using realist conventions as his point of departure.

Ionesco achieves the same effect in La Cantatrice chauve in the first few minutes, distorting the familiar in a rather more radical manner. He opens the play on a conventional bourgeois interior and then immediately shatters the illusion when the clock strikes seventeen and Madame Smith utters "Tiens, il est neuf heures" (TH I 21).

This kind of lack of correspondence sets the pattern for the rest of the play, in which the familiar and 'normal' are juxtaposed with the nonsensical. The loss of connection not only occurs between the characters and their surroundings but at the level of language, within sentences. The structure of a sentence will suggest a causal link which is not supported by the content: "Nous avons bien mangé ce soir. C'est parce que nous habitons dans les environs de Londres et que notre nom est Smith" (TH I

21). The characters' failure to act in accordance with their words emphasises the impression that they are not in touch with themselves either.²¹ The Firechief announces "Je veux bien enlever mon casque, mais je n'ai pas le temps de m'asseoir" while the stage direction states "Il s'asseyait sans enlever son casque" (TH I 42). In Scene Two the Smiths depart in order to change their clothes but return in Scene Seven wearing the same clothes as before.

Pirandello frequently stages a dilemma involving a character fighting to preserve the integrity of his world from the forces of convention. In the world of La Cantatrice chauve this struggle has been lost. The characters have no individuality or discrimination and have given up any meaningful interaction with the world around them. Just as the townsfolk in Pensaci Giacomino believe in the absolute nature of their moral codes, so the Smiths and Martins have complete faith in language. In a way they have become form and language because they have no inner life:

Le texte de La Cantatrice chauve..., composé d'expressions toutes faites, des clichés les plus éculés, me révélait, par cela même, les automatismes du langage, du comportement des gens, le "parler pour ne rien dire", le parler parce qu'il n'y a rien à dire de personnel, l'absence de vie intérieure, la mécanique du quotidien, l'homme baignant dans son milieu social, ne s'en distinguant plus (NCN 253).

Madame Smith in her opening monologue is so much a part of her surroundings that she merely lists what 'is', pointlessly describing the evening meal in minute detail. The futility is underlined by the fact that she is informing her husband of what they have just done, as though it had no reality unless verbalised.

If they fail to be selective in their conversation, the characters are also indiscriminately logical. Their reasoning is divorced from reality: Mr. Smith insists that if a patient dies, his doctor should perish too. The rigid logic of his inquiry as to why the ages of the deceased are announced in newspapers but not those of neonates, is designed to make the

audience question the value of reason.

These characters approach the world entirely from the outside, via forms – language, logic, rules, habits, aphorisms and proverbs. In this world people are their names: when husband and wife both happen to be called Bobby Watson "Comme ils avaient le même nom, on ne pouvait pas les distinguer l'un de l'autre quand on les voyait ensemble. Ce n'est qu'après sa mort à lui, qu'on a pu vraiment savoir qui était l'un et qui était l'autre" (TH I 24). The ludicrous discussion of the Watson family – all of whom are called Bobby – is an acerbic comment on the bourgeois love of tradition and uniformity at the expense of change, multiplicity and individuality. The characters' external approach to life is epitomised in the scene where the Martins swap information in order to establish the fact that they are man and wife. Their sense of identity is created from the objective details of their life, not out of any inner awareness or sense of relationship. They live entirely on the surface of language. But their rationalism and protracted deduction lets them down, as the maid points out, for lack of consideration of the fact that they are not who they think they are: "Ainsi tout le système d'argumentation de Donald s'écroule en se heurtant à ce dernier obstacle qui anéantit toute sa théorie" (TH I 33).

The maid's admission that she is really Sherlock Holmes highlights another feature of the behaviour of the Smiths and Martins. Much of their empty chatter concerns arguments about identity, family relations and epistemological questions. Like the characters in Ciascuno a suo modo and Così è (se vi pare), they are intent on categorising, pinning down and rationalising their world but it constantly eludes them. This is most obvious in Scenes VII and VIII where they attempt to establish the rules governing the ringing of the doorbell. Madame Martin sums this up later on as "un vrai quart d'heure cartésien" (TH I 52). Ionesco is at once parodying the preoccupation with trivia and their attempt to find absolute

truth through logic and physical evidence.

In Pirandello's plays the constructed world disintegrates under pressure of the irrational which "forms" are incapable of containing. But in La Cantatrice chauve the final explosion seems to occur mechanically, illustrating Ionesco's notion that form is "ce qui canalise irrationnellement nos passions" (NCN 334). Violence is generated by the fact that the characters are not relating to anyone or anything. Violence erupts not on the basis of an argument or exchange of views but rather because the characters have lost their souls and their control over form. They are the victims of their own language. The ending is anticipated by Mary's poem about fire which ends on a universal conflagration:

Le feu prit
Tout prit feu
Prit feu, prit feu.
(TH I 51)

Fire is a traditional symbol of life but in the world of La Cantatrice chauve even the fires are scheduled.

The final climactic scene begins with a non-dialogue of proverbs, generalisations, clichés and commonplaces. The interaction is not semantic but by rhyme and rhythm. This scene and the eventual return to the dialogue of the first scene, suggest a world in which, as Enrico IV says, "Rimasticate la vita dei morti". It is this scene which shows off the element of the play most frequently mentioned by Ionesco. It satirises not the behaviour of a particular class or society, but a general human tendency: "Il s'agit, surtout, d'une sorte de petite bourgeoisie universelle, le petit bourgeois étant l'homme des idées reçues, des slogans, le conformiste de partout:..." (NCN 252).

Like many of Pirandello's plays, La Cantatrice chauve shows up the inadequacy of our procedures for establishing knowledge – Ionesco calls it "la tragédie du langage". In plays such as Ciascuno a suo modo and Sei

personaggi the main action is about how to assess and represent events which have already happened. The emphasis has shifted from action to perception. As we saw in the opening scenes of Ciascuno a suo modo one way of achieving this shift of emphasis is to conceal the subject of the dialogue so that the audience has to look at the shape instead. Ionesco uses a variation on this procedure: he makes the subject of the dialogue nonsensical so that the audience's attention is not held by the meaning of the words. The play embodies the perception of both authors that to unify the world by taking form for an absolute reality is to fragment the world and dehumanise people.

ii) "Un momento di tempesta": "La Leçon"

The most obvious disjunction in La Cantatrice chauve was the fact that the lady of the title fails to put in an appearance. In La Leçon, although the audience witnesses a lesson, it is also shown that behind the pedagogical surfaces of the dialogue something much more sinister is occurring. The lesson learnt by the audience is that there is no direct relationship between words and reality.

Whereas in La Cantatrice chauve the forms of bourgeois life were given a nonsensical content, here the thin crust of realism keeps disintegrating then reforming as the subtext of violence surfaces for a moment then disappears. As desire flares in the teacher's eyes, the words are imbued with disturbing undertones:

... vous apprendrez que l'on peut s'attendre à tout.... Nous ne pouvons être sûrs de rien, Mademoiselle, en ce monde (TH I 66).

Il ne faut pas uniquement intégrer. Il faut aussi désintégrer. C'est ça la vie (TH I 73).

The examples the teacher uses in his arithmetic teaching are distinctly sadistic, concerning the adding and subtraction of ears: "je vous en mange une, combien vous en reste-t-il?" (TH I 74).

Towards the end of the play where the teacher's linguistics evinces a

certain twisted logic, the real nature of what is happening is conveyed through the accelerating rhythm of the exchanges.

La Leçon robs the audience of its innocence with regard to language which is revealed not as a vehicle of truth, but as an instrument of power and sexuality. The pupil visibly and physically disintegrates beneath the teacher's verbal onslaught, until he has her repeating verbatim after him.

The play is a brilliant and brutal demonstration of Diego Cinci's vision of the human mind and the functioning of forms; our words and rationality are manipulated by our irrational instincts. Man is a puppet pulled by the strings of desire. Ionesco has underlined this very Pirandellian point in an interview:

Si l'on veut trouver un sens à La Leçon, c'est la toute-puissance du désir. L'irrationalité extrêmement puissante du désir: l'instinct est plus fort que la culture (ANT 221).

Far from being objective, reason is often used to justify decisions which the emotions have already made. "Derrière chaque pensée claire, derrière chaque comportement raisonnable, il y a une passion cachée" (NCN 325).

The play is Pirandellian in two other ways too. The idea of language as a deadly instrument is suggested by Enrico IV: "Tutta la vita è schiacciata così dal peso delle parole! Il peso dei morti!" (MN I 350).

La Leçon not only shows language as dangerous in the hands of those in power, but it is indicated that everyone is a victim of language: at one point, as the play is building up to its terrifying climax, the teacher and pupil start speaking each other's lines, carried along by the rhythm which has become established.²²

The play embodies the idea repeated by Pirandello that words, far from 'containing' reality in some way, actually cover up and mask it. The Father in Sei personaggi makes the point that words can spell away remorse:

Fra si! Fra si! Come se non fosse il conforto di tutti, davanti a un fatto che non si spiega, davanti a un male che ci consuma, trovare una parola che non dice nulla, e in cui ci si acquieta! (MN I 64).

Ionesco expresses a similar idea in Journal en miettes: language is an expression of helplessness, it stands in for direct action. "Au lieu d'être action, il vous console comme il peut de ne pas agir" (JM 104). But it is not only words which disguise reality. When the maid offers the teacher a swastika armband which will exonerate him of his crime, it is suggested that ideological systems mask and offer a justification for violent instincts. The teacher's act of murder will be transferred into a different context whose system of meaning will transform it into something more acceptable. As we have seen, this view of 'form' as a mask rather than an expression of life is central in Pirandello's vision of the world. Ionesco identifies this kind of disjunction as essentially absurd.

La Leçon aussi a un langage tout à fait absurde, c'est-à-dire une action séparée du langage. Le professeur tue son élève, mais jusqu'à la fin il continue à lui donner des leçons d'arithmétique et de philologie. L'action ne concorde pas avec le langage (ANT 214).

iii) "Salutatemi tutti i costumi.": "Jacques ou la soumission"

Jacques ou la soumission shares the theme of Pirandello's Pensaci Giacomino: the problem of rebelling against conventional social behaviour, the clash between the non-conformist individual and the unthinking conformists who blindly accept the forms of the majority and will not tolerate alternatives. Jacques ou la soumission and its sequel L'Avenir est dans les oeufs follow the rebel, Jacques, through three submissions: to the family creed, to marriage and sexuality, and to reproduction.

Jacques' rebellious stance is characterised at first by his silence, his refusal to utter prescribed words. Although his family share the clichéd, aphoristic language of the Smiths in La Cantatrice chauve, their chatter is not random but directed towards the urgent mission of unifying their group by making Jacques the same as themselves. Their lack of

individuality is suggested in the way they are all called Jacques (apart from Jacqueline) and are only distinguished by their role within the family. Jacques stands out because he is the only character without a mask. The detail of his clothes being too small for him recalls the image of bursting out of tight clothes which Pirandello uses to symbolise the rebellion against convention in his story "La marsina stretta".

The arbitrariness and banality of society's criteria for establishing unity are parodied by the slogan which Jacques is supposed to pronounce: "J'adore les pommes de terre au lard!" (TH I 107). Ionesco suggests that conformity is bought at the price of the individual abandoning discrimination and thinking for himself. Jacques-mère exhorts "parle-moi sans réfléchir à ce que tu dis. C'est la meilleure façon de penser correctement, en intellectuel et en bon fils" (TH I 105).

Jacques' resistance is finally broken when his sister reminds him that he is "chronométrable" (subject to time), suggesting that fear of death makes people accept conventions and establish unity by retreating into the shelter of fixed form. The notion is at once Pirandellian and Existentialist.

Jacques not only falls prey to convention but, like the pupil in La Leçon, to words and sexuality. The danger of words is suggested early in the play by Jacques: "O paroles, que de crimes on commet en votre nom!" (TH I 107). This is demonstrated when Roberte wins Jacques over with incantations and stories, then seduces him with a torrent of surrealistic images and rhythmic poetry, finally triumphing with images of water and mud.²³ Ionesco explains in his notes that this vocabulary expresses subjection to the material.

Jacques' defeat by sexuality and the one-dimensional bourgeois world is neatly symbolised at the end of the erotic word game when all objects are reduced to one thing, "chat": "Pour y désigner les choses, un seul

mot: chat" (TH I 129). To Bonnefoy's suggestion that this represents a desire for a universal language, Ionesco replies that on the contrary "C'est plutôt une absence de langage, c'est plutôt l'indifférentiation, tout est au même niveau, c'est l'abdication de la lucidité, de la liberté devant l'organique" (ECB 146). Ionesco has dramatised here how attempts to establish unity often result in uniformity, the denial of multiple possibilities and individuality. In L'Avenir est dans les oeufs the defeat of individuality through instinct is suggested in the 'bestialising' of human reproduction. At the end of the play as the families celebrate their victory crying "vive la race blanche", Ionesco seems to be suggesting that racism is another pernicious aspect of the desire for unity.

iv) "Una spaventosa miseria": "Rhinocéros"

Rhinocéros abounds in Pirandellian themes treated in a context foreign to Pirandello, that of politics and ideology. The image of the rhinoceros was born in Ionesco's mind at a time when he was daily seeing his friends being drawn into supporting the Fascist regime in Rumania and when Fascism constituted the greatest single threat to Western civilisation. But when he wrote the play nearly twenty years later he was witnessing the same totalitarian mechanisms occurring with regard to Communism.

Richard Coe has produced some strong evidence in support of his view that the play is ideologically specific, most notably an unpublished essay written ten years before the play in which Ionesco explicitly links Nazism with the ideology of a return to Nature or natural purity.²⁴ "Il faut retourner à l'intégrité primordiale" (TH III 76) is Jean's reason for becoming a rhinoceros. However, here we shall be seeking to suggest that when Ionesco came to write the play he wanted to demonstrate the processes of totalitarianism in general. This interpretation is supported by Ionesco's numerous statements about the play:

A proprement parler ma pièce n'est même pas une satire: elle est

la description, assez objective, d'un processus de fanatisation, de la naissance d'un totalitarisme qui grandit, se propage, conquiert, transforme un monde, et le transforme totalement, bien sûr, puisqu'il est totalitarisme.... il s'agissait bien, dans cette pièce, de dénoncer, de démasquer, de montrer comment une idéologie se transforme en idolâtrie, comment elle envahit tout, comment elle hystérise les masses,... (NCN 290).

But there is ample evidence in the text itself that Ionesco is making a broadly political point. The detail on which Coe bases his argument is only one of many in a complex image, and perhaps more importantly, the other themes which Ionesco weaves into his portrait of the birth of a totalitarian state are incompatible with a specific ideological stance. We shall argue that Ionesco has written a tragedy about the kind of solitude evoked by Pirandello's Enrico IV:

Guai se vi affondaste come me a considerare questa cosa orribile, che fa veramente impazzire; che se siete accanto a un altro, e gli guardate gli occhi - come io guardavo un giorno certi occhi - potete figurarvi come un mendico davanti a una porta in cui non potrà mai entrare: chi vi entra, non sarete mai voi, col vostro mondo dentro, come lo vedete e lo toccate; ma uno ignoto a voi, come quell'altro nel suo mondo impenetrabile vi vede e vi tocca ... (MN I 353).

In Rhinocéros Ionesco expressly turns a metaphor into a fleshly reality in order to avoid real political argument and avoid showing a committed position. The use of an image allows him to be general. However, the difficulty lay in keeping the generality of the image whilst using it to illustrate the slow build-up of metamorphoses and the minute processes of conversion. Ionesco needed to show people being converted to something, so the image inevitably had to be fleshed out.

Despite this, the rhinoceros is still primarily an embodiment of the urge to unity and of absolutism applied to impersonal systems. The representation of a conversion to a totalitarian ideology by a metamorphosis involving a change of species expresses concisely its radical and 'total' nature. The central quality of the rhinoceros is its single-mindedness: "Je vais tout droit, je vais toujours tout droit" (TH III 69).

"J'ai un but, moi. Je fonce sur lui" (TH III 73). Their lack of individuality - "Ils sont tous pareils, tous pareils!" (TH III 104) - is also an aspect of their search for unity.

Bérenger se trouve seul dans un monde déshumanisé, où tous les individus ont voulu être semblables aux autres. C'est parce qu'ils ont voulu être comme les autres qu'ils se sont déshumanisés, ou plutôt dépersonnalisés, ce qui revient au même. Il y a peut-être autre chose. Ces gens ont renoncé à leur vie propre, à leur personnalité, il est possible qu'ils trouvent une certaine joie, un certain bonheur animal dans cette abdication (ECB 128).

Such qualities apply to Fascism and Communism alike. Whether they assert the supremacy of the state or of the race, or declare "one people, one empire, one leader", their common denominator is the appeal to the individual to identify with and serve a single end. On this level, as Ionesco's initial diary entry in 1940 underlines, anything involving collective effort, whether for good or bad causes, is evil.

Toutes les armées sont des armées de rhinocéros. Tous les soldats des justes causes sont des rhinocéros. Toutes les guerres saintes sont rhinocériques. La justice est rhinocérique. Les révolutions sont rhinocériques (PPPP 117).

This is supported by a recurring comment in Ionesco's notebooks, to the effect that once any belief has become generally accepted, it loses its value by becoming a source of oppression and conformism ('ils' refers to the heroes of revolutions).

Mais dès que la vérité pour laquelle ils ont donné leur vie devient vérité officielle, il n'y a plus de héros, il n'y a plus que des fonctionnaires doués de la prudence et de la lâcheté qui conviennent à l'emploi. C'est tout le thème de Rhinocéros (NCN 286).

Another comment from Ionesco's original diary entry explicitly relates the phenomenon portrayed in Rhinocéros to the 'decentred' situation of twentieth century man without God. The links between conformism and religious impulses will become apparent later in this study:

Ce que j'admettrai, c'est ceci: tout pour Dieu, si on est croyant; ou sinon, tout pour l'homme, pour les hommes, pour la joie de l'homme, pour le perfectionnement de l'homme. Comment être pour l'État qui n'est qu'une machine à administrer.... C'est une

abstraction, ou plutôt c'est une machine juridique, mais, pour les rhinocéros, l'État est devenu un Dieu.... Avec Dieu, qu'il existe ou non, on s'entretenait personnellement.... Mais qu'est-ce que l'État, comment peut-on se projeter dans l'État, et qu'est-ce que la Nation, et qu'est-ce que la Société? (PPPP 117-8).

Whereas the plot and overall rhythm of Rhinocéros follow the process of social transformation, much of the 'local' dialogue focuses on the role of reason and the ways it is put at the service of totalitarianism.

Rhinocéros est sans doute une pièce antinazie, mais elle est aussi surtout une pièce contre les hystéries collectives et les épidémies qui se cachent sous le couvert de la raison et des idées, ... (NCN 278).

The characters constantly evoke the objectivity and logic of their positions. In the first act the presence of a logician alerts the audience to this thread of argument in the play. His declaration that "la justice c'est la logique" epitomises the assumption of many of the characters that reason is the appropriate tool for solving moral questions. The logician is shown to be pedantic, fatuous and out of touch, becoming distracted, like many of the characters, by the problem of categorising the rhinoceros. As Bérenger says, "cela ne résout pas la question" – the question being the anti-social behaviour of the beast (TH III 42-3). The fact that the logician becomes a rhinoceros illustrates Ionesco's contention that "le rationalisme mène à la déraison" (ECB 123).

In the second act the spirit of reason walks abroad in the character of Botard who prides himself on his scientific, methodical mind, but whose rationalism is shown to be motivated by professional jealousy. His assertion that "j'ai la clé des événements, un système d'interprétation infailible" (TH III 63) is shown to be empty and his insights based on suspicion.

Dudard represents a more liberal kind of intellectual who uses his reason to probe into the psychological implications of the rise of the rhinoceros. "Tout est logique, comprendre, c'est justifier" (TH III 93).

He loses sight of the moral question because of a thorough-going relativism and "ouverture d'esprit" which ultimately amount to a brand of fatalism: an acceptance of things simply because they are.

Lorsqu'un tel phénomène se produit, il a certainement une raison de se produire. C'est cette cause qu'il faut discerner ... Après tout je me demande si, moralement, vous avez le droit de vous mêler de l'affaire ... Peut-on savoir où est le mal, où est le bien? (TH III 89).

If at first Dudard advocates observing the rhinoceros as a phenomenon, "avec détachement", he finally becomes one on the grounds that it is only fair to judge something from within. He represents the kind of intellectual spirit to which the Figliastras in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore objects: "che schifo di tutte codeste complicazioni intellettuali, di tutta codesta filosofia che scopre la bestia e poi la vuol salvare, scusare ..." (MN I 71).

Bérenger stands in antithesis to all the pseudo-rationalising of the other characters. His is a gut reaction, an intuitive abhorrence of the rhinoceros: "ça me serre le coeur" (TH III 87). His reaction to Dudard's pedantic fandangoes is an outright rejection of reason: "Je refuse de penser!" (TH III 94). The ending of the play suggests that there is something irreducible and mysterious in Bérenger which prevents him from joining the rhinoceros, even though he now finds them attractive and would like to be one. As Dudard says "Vous n'avez pas la vocation" (TH III 89). His is not a conscious, reasoned or ideological stance. Bérenger hangs on to his individuality and resists the pull of 'idolatry' against all the odds. He can even be seen as a victim of his individuality as much as the others are of their conformism. Some of his reactions are as fanatical and intolerant as those of his fellows. His aspirations to save the world and his dismissal of the rhinoceros' language can appear arrogant and xenophobic compared with Daisy's tolerance: "Il faut trouver un modus vivendi, il faut tâcher de s'entendre avec" (TH III 111).

But the play goes beyond the matter of respect and tolerance of other

people's beliefs and opinions. Although B  renger recognises that the rhinoceros should be tolerated "A condition qu'elles ne d  truisent pas la n  tre [vie]" (TH III 75), the play presents the issue as being less straightforward. At what point have we a right to assert our own reality in the face of other versions? When do tolerance and open-mindedness become stupidity?²⁵ Although Ionesco clearly approves of B  renger's preservation of his individuality, there is another level at which the play expresses some insoluble problems and seems to be asking whether there is a 'degree zero' of reality.²⁶ "Peut-on savoir o   s'arr  te le normal, o   commence l'anormal?" asks Dudard in Act III (TH III 93). Daisy returns to the question later: "Apr  s tout, c'est peut-  tre nous qui avons besoin d'  tre sauv  s. C'est nous, peut-  tre les anormaux" (TH III 112). B  renger is neither narrow-minded nor intolerant of others, but torn between his primal horror of the rhinoceros' being and the pull of conformity which makes them attractive. The disturbing effect of 'otherness' and its link with 'monstrosity' is described by Ionesco in an interview:

Je ne sais pas si vous l'avez remarqu  , mais lorsque les gens ne partagent plus votre opinion, lorsqu'on ne peut plus s'entendre avec eux, on a l'impression de s'adresser    des monstres... [...] Il vous tueraient en toute bonne conscience si vous ne pensiez pas comme eux. (NCN 285)²⁷

However the play can be seen to investigate otherness at a level deeper than that of differences of opinion and ideology. B  renger's failure to become a rhinoceros either through reasoning or an act of will, suggests the presence of an irreducible self within human beings. Why it is that the other characters fail to resist the pull of conformism is a mystery. The play here hints at the radical solitude and the problem of communication described by both Enrico IV and the Father in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore. Only Martin Esslin, it seems, has come near to appreciating the extent to which Rhinoc  ros makes a 'tabula rasa' of reality.

If Rhinocéros is a tract against conformism and insensitivity (which it is), it also mocks the individualist who merely makes a virtue of necessity in insisting on his superiority as a sensitive, artistic being. That is where the play transcends the oversimplification of propaganda and becomes a valid statement of the fatal entanglement, the basic inescapability and absurdity of the human condition.²⁸

Like Enrico IV and La vita che ti diedi, Rhinocéros examines the problem of maintaining beliefs which are radically different from those of the majority. Enrico is torn between his indignation at Mathilde's invasion of his private reality and his awareness that she has no conception of her own reality as a fiction: "- Loro sí, tutti i giorni, ogni momento, pretendono che gli altri siano come li vogliono loro; ma non è mica una sopraffazione, questa! - Che! Che! - È il loro modo di pensare, il loro modo di vedere, di sentire: ciascuno ha il suo!" (MN I 349). This awareness of all realities as constructions is missing from Rhinocéros.²⁹ Ionesco has not staged an encounter between the man who is conscious of the artificiality of all form and those who lack that insight. For once Ionesco seems to have suspended his metaphysical awareness in order to focus on a purely social problem.

In answer to the critics who read the play as a criticism of a specific political standpoint and who complained of being left "dans le vide" with no indication of a positive alternative, Ionesco declared:

Il me paraît ridicule de demander, à un auteur de pièces de théâtre, une bible; la voie du salut; il est ridicule de penser pour tout un monde et de donner à tout ce monde une philosophie automatique; l'auteur dramatique pose des problèmes (NCN 292).

Like Pirandello then, he reveals the 'void' and exposes the fragility of our reality: "C'est de ce vide qu'un homme libre doit se tirer tout seul, par ses propres forces et non par la force des autres" (NCN 292). This echoes almost exactly one of the critics in the metaplay of Ciascuno a suo modo who realises that "Qua s'insegna che ciascuno se lo deve costruire da sé il terreno sotto i piedi, ..." (MN I 161).

VI Elusive Conclusions: "Così è (se vi pare)" and "Les Chaises"

The audience's or reader's desire for "black and white" solutions is a manifestation of the human need for unity which plays its part in drama and indeed in literature in general. In this section I shall examine how Pirandello and Ionesco treat the urge for truth through the form as well as the content of their plays. A comparison between Così è (se vi pare) and Les Chaises reveals that Ionesco turns the basic device of Pirandello's play into an all-pervasive structural principle which makes the dramatic experience one of a "loss of centre".

In Così è (se vi pare) Pirandello awakens his audience's desire for messages by titling the play "parabola". This ensures a closer identification with the curiosity of the townsfolk and with the play's 'detective' structure which proceeds by a series of interrogations and analyses of 'evidence', and builds up to a scene in which the final solution is supposed to be revealed.

It is not merely in the absence of the final single answer that the play's rigid structuring conflicts with its content. At every turn the quest for certainty is undermined by Laudisi who constantly exposes the limitations of the main tool in the investigation, reason. On one level the trick of the play is to show that the single truth which is supposed to be revealed is both multiple and relative. There are as many truths as protagonists in the drama. Furthermore, those truths are not constant and objective but are created out of social interaction and role play. The way in which Signor Ponza and Signora Frola are shown to 'perform' for the townsfolk provides an element of self-conscious theatricality which anticipates Ciascuno a suo modo.

The central feature of the townsfolk's curiosity is the assumption that there exists an ultimate authority which will provide them with the answer. They seek truth outside the situation, in "dati di fatto", on the

desks of bureaucrats or in figures of authority such as the Prefect.

On another level though, the real point of the "parabola" is to illustrate how the human lust for truth wreaks havoc when it is brought to bear on the private lives of others. The townsfolk's curiosity is disproportionate to the issue at hand. At the beginning Signora Agazzi is shown having recourse to the Prefect simply because she has been refused entry to Signor Frola's apartment. Through the analytical intervention of Laudisi, the issue widens from that of the identity of a woman to an epistemological crisis encapsulated by Signora Cini: "Ma allora, oh Dio, di certo non si sa niente!" (MN I 1047). Each time the townsfolk's curiosity is frustrated they feel themselves threatened by madness.³⁰ It is their very construction of reality which is challenged. As this construction is taken apart, the play's realism passes over into the grotesque until by the final showdown the entire cast is on the stage joined by the Chief of Police, the Prefect and "molti altri signori e signore" (MN I 1061).

Like Così è (se vi pare), Les Chaises has a misleading framework which intentionally draws out the audience's desire for a message only to frustrate it.³¹ The presence of a blackboard on the stage from the start and the subsequent dialogue leads them to expect a grand revelation. But whereas in Pirandello's play the joke is primarily on the townsfolk, Ionesco's on-stage audience is invisible. The platform is prepared as for a theatrical performance with the empty chairs facing the back of the stage so that the real audience is seen to be an extension of the invisible one.

Although Les Chaises plays mercilessly on the audience's expectations and points to the futility of going to the theatre for a revelation of truth, the theme of the absent message broadens to encompass absence 'tout court'. As Ionesco says, he wrote the play primarily for the ending, in order to express "'le vide' ontologique" (NCN 266): "le thème de la pièce, c'est le rien".³² Così è (se vi pare) is perhaps less radical in that

although the contradictions are never resolved, the audience is at least given their *raison d'être*, and the absence of a solution is offset by the theme of the Ponza's and Frola's love conquering their tragedy.

Les Chaises has often been seen as a typical Absurdist joke. However, the invisibility of the audience, the dumbness of the orator and the lack of a final message can also be viewed as part of a game which the old couple play nightly. The showdown with which the play culminates is not a real event, even though on this occasion it has real results, namely the suicide of the couple.

The games played by the couple are part of a strategy for survival and are designed to distract the old man from his sense of failure. Just as the Ponzas and Frolas bolster each other in their illusions, so the old woman in Les Chaises constantly corroborates her husband's illusions and strives to shore up his crumbling self-esteem.

The old man's life is presented as empty and fragmented. Living in an isolated tower surrounded by stagnant water, he describes himself as a "concierger", a figure associated with banality and "*idées reçues*" in Ionesco's work.³³ He is furthermore an orphan and has lost his origins. The couple's conversation swings between nostalgic reminiscence of the past or wishful thinking about their immortal future when "*Au moins, nous aurons notre rue ...*" (TH II 54).³⁴ The old man's sense of loss focuses on Paris, the lost city of light, of which only a song remains, and a beautiful garden, of which he only has a faint memory. "*C'était un lieu, un temps exquis ...*" (TH II 18). The old man's insecurity makes him childish (he sits on the old woman's lap) and tearful. His wife distracts him by telling him how great he really is and what he might have achieved:

Ah! oui, tu es certainement un grand savant. Tu es très doué, mon chou. Tu aurais pu être Président chef, Roi chef, ou même, Docteur chef, Maréchal chef, si tu avais voulu, si tu avais eu un peu d'ambition dans la vie ... (TH II 12).

The game-playing begins when the old man declares he is bored and his wife suggests "Pour nous distraire, fais semblant comme l'autre soir" (TH II 12) and we are told the games have been going on for seventy-five years. It is when the old man has a prolonged tantrum that the old woman resorts to the game of the message to soothe him:

La Vieille: ... tout n'est pas brisé, tout n'est pas perdu, tu leur diras tout, tu expliqueras, tu as un message ...

Le Vieux: J'ai un message, tu dis vrai, je lutte, une mission, j'ai quelque chose dans le ventre, un message à communiquer à l'humanité, à l'humanité ... (TH I 16).

The claims made for the message are wildly exaggerated in the light of the old man's job and temperament. The wife plays along as usual to calm his worries about his powers of expression: "C'est un devoir sacré. Tu n'as pas le droit de taire ton message; il faut que tu le révéles aux hommes, ils l'attendent... l'univers n'attend plus que toi" (TH II 18). Although the old woman suggests stopping the game and putting off the reunion ("Ça ne va pas trop nous fatiguer?" (TH II 19)), the old man carries on with the pretence. By the end of the gathering, the claims for the message have become even more exaggerated and take on an absolute tone and cosmic scope:

J'ai mis au point tout un système ... mon système est parfait. [...] Si on veut bien obéir à mes instructions. [...] Sauvons le monde! [...] Une seule vérité pour tous! [...] Car j'ai la certitude absolue! (TH II 43-4).

... moi seul aurais pu sauver l'humanité, qui est bien malade (TH II 48).

Once the orator and the Emperor have arrived, the old man blusters in grand rhetorical terms, giving out exaggerated thanks "à la solidarité universelle de tous les hommes ... à notre patrie, à l'État" (TH II 53). He finally exhorts the orator to "faire rayonner sur la postérité, la lumière de mon esprit... Fais donc connaître à l'Univers ma philosophie" (TH II 54). In this manner the play not only mocks the audience for expecting messages in the theatre but parodies also the notion that

anyone's life "adds up to" something, the idea of a hero, idol or saviour and any belief in absolute, all-embracing truths and systems. Despite the fact that the orator is not meant to be any more real than the invisible guests, he reinforces the theme of messages in the theatre in that it is his role to pass on someone else's message and play a role for them.³⁵ He stands for an absence of originality as well as all our 'media'. Dressed in the manner of a nineteenth century painter or poet he represents a voice from the past, from an optimistic age which believed in solutions, progress and 'realism', and which also held a view of the artist as messianic genius.

When the old woman first introduces the idea of the message game, the old man makes the excuse that "j'ai tant de mal à m'exprimer ..." and the old woman puts forward the Pirandellian idea that all reality and meaning are created through forms:

C'est en parlant qu'on trouve les idées, les mots, et puis nous, dans nos propres mots, la ville aussi, le jardin, on retrouve peut-être tout, on n'est plus orphelin (TH II 18).

The subsequent action and ending of the play is a bitter comment on this. The couple do not find themselves but lose themselves. During the game of the social reunion they become separated from each other by the clutter of empty chairs because they are taken in and carried away by their own performances. The way in which they are alienated from the gathering and reduced to fetching and carrying chairs and selling programmes and chocolates can be seen as an image of Ionesco's view that our fictions distract us from the essential. The chairs become a symbol not just of absence and emptiness, but of constructed reality itself as an 'empty fullness', a framework for an absent reality.³⁶ The lack of any solid, 'given' reality is further dramatised by the sudden changes in personality shown by the two characters. Ionesco seems to be making the very Pirandellian point that our identity is forged from interacting with others and is fluid, not

absolute. The presence of a "photographeur" (a maker of images) would seem to support this.

The final suicide of the couple suggests that words, far from putting us back in touch with the lost paradise and ourselves, ultimately fail us. The play emerges as a warning against a blind faith in form and against total identification with the habits, roles and constructions which make up our strategies for survival.³⁷ The parodying of the comforting rituals and the shelter of the social mask in conjunction with the play's questioning of secondhand messages and the notion of ultimate truth suggest that Les Chaises advises us to confront emptiness and to reject constructed meaning. Like Così è (se vi pare), the play examines how individuals deal with isolation and loss. While Pirandello's play defends the human right to cover up tragedy with compromises, role play and illusion, Les Chaises insists that we face the 'void' directly. This intransigence on the part of Ionesco in refusing all fabricated comfort is one of the main differences between the attitudes of the two writers.

The juxtaposition of these two plays is also of formal interest. Olga Ragusa in an essay on Pirandello and Verga argues that the pattern found in Verga's Sicilian novels of the drama of the village square involving the individual surrounded by a 'social' circle of scheming neighbours provides the basic pattern of Pirandello's art which "finds its ultimate formal shape in the plot within the plot".³⁸ I would argue that Così è (se vi pare) offers a variation of this pattern whilst Les Chaises can be seen as a development of it.

In Pirandello's play the pattern is of a family tragedy whose resolution is scrutinised by an external group. The real nature of the tragedy is never uncovered. Instead, the drama of the play is a drama of perception or consciousness. By keeping the original drama hidden behind a screen of contradiction, our attention is led to the 'metadrama', to the

processes of human perception and the nature of different kinds of realities.

Les Chaises too involves contradictions, not just one but a whole string of them running right through the play: the sun is (not) shining, Paris did (not) exist, the couple have (not) a son. This device serves to prevent the audience from being distracted by the referential meaning of the words when it is the playing of roles which is the focus of attention.³⁹ The tissue of contradictions and the empty chairs both serve to put a 'framework' in the foreground. The invisibility of the guests means that the social behaviour of the old people is thrown into relief. The device used in La Cantatrice chauve and Jacques ou la soumission, of distorting familiar expressions in order to underline their clichéd nature, is extended in Les Chaises to become the principle upon which the entire play is constructed and at the same time the perfect embodiment of its content.

Les Chaises pushes to an extreme the structural principle of Così è (se vi pare). In Pirandello's play the behaviour of the Ponza-Frola family is analysed in the Cartesian language of our world and Laudisi is there to mediate between the audience and the play. In Les Chaises the contradictions are not explained or talked about and the audience is doubly disorientated: there is no message delivered and no raisonneur figure to act as interpreter. Contradiction is embedded in the dialogue and taken for granted, not foregrounded or discussed. The resulting disorientation is far more radical than in Così è (se vi pare). The vision of human existence as a series of factitious, fragmentary forms built over a void here infects the very language and dialogue of the play as well as its overall structure. The non-existence of truth is no longer a theme but the core of the dramatic experience. Not only do fantasy and reality, authenticity and role play merge, but towards the end of the play the

boundaries between the characters blur too, the old woman becoming a mere echo of her husband. Ionesco deepens the fragmentation with a liberal sprinkling of nonsense, word-play and the disjunction of word and act: an imitation of February turns out to be a scratching of the head in the style of Stan Laurel. The old man repeatedly orders his wife to drink her tea. The stage direction reads "Il n'y a pas de thé, évidemment" (TH II 12).

The development of stage dialogue in the period between Pirandello's play and Les Chaises is one of the most radical innovations of the modern theatre. By the time of Ionesco the implications of Pirandello's insights into the nature of consciousness have worked their way deep into dramatic texts. Andrew Kennedy calls "the merging of fantasy and reality in the dialogue of personal encounter" "one of the Copernican revolutions of modern drama" and points to the breakdown of the divisions between fantasy and reality as "among the major changes of sensibility in our culture":

Most early naturalistic drama – like Greek and Renaissance drama before it – was written out of an implicit assumption that the 'truth' can be 'unmasked' – however circuitously, and at whatever cost to the protagonists and their community: the hidden cause of evil in Thebes is uncovered through Oedipus's relentless and self-destructive quest; the 'equivocation of the fiend' may destroy Macbeth, but it does not undermine the audience's hierarchy of values, the hard-earned sanity of distinguishing between the 'real' and the 'hallucinatory'.... Ambiguity in a character's motive and utterance – like disguise, dissembling, 'smiling villainy' and all the countless strategies of human camouflage – was, until our own time, always presented within a solid framework that allowed the audience – and usually the protagonists themselves – to reach a point of final discovery.⁴⁰

Ionesco is of course not the only modern dramatist to use such disorientating tactics. One could make a case for its being as much a distinguishing feature of the Theatre of the Absurd as its much discussed nihilism. Beckett's Endgame plays on the audience's lust for meaning by seducing them with tantalising symbols which lead nowhere. "Each invitation to closure is followed by new openings which prove that closure to be reductive."⁴¹ As in Les Chaises, "the central (aesthetic) experience of

the play is not anchored in referential meaning, but in the strategies guiding aesthetic response."⁴² In this manner, the audience's notion of reality is manipulated indirectly, through its unconscious response rather than through its intellect.

Pinter's aim is often the same but rather than planting symbols in his texts he uses a veneer of realism and the structures of the well-made play to draw out the audience's desire for certainty and coherence and then frustrate it. What seems like Realism is in fact a highly mannered and deftly structured mode which serves to lure the spectator into a false sense of security. "Pinter does not turn his audience's expectations upside down as Shaw does, ... but he presents so many surface clues which set up patterns of expectations - accents, idioms, clichés, familiar place-names - that the audience always feels that it is on the point of grasping the pattern. Only it never does."⁴³

The expectation of a resounding conclusion, a message or a moral point is only one feature of the well-made play. The following section examines two plays which explicitly challenge the Realist form.

VII Decentering the Theatre: "Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore" and "Victimes du devoir"

Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore and Victimes du devoir both set out to violate and expose the dramatic conventions of their time. Despite being separated by thirty-two years and one of the liveliest periods of theatrical experimentation these plays are concerned with the same conventions, which in Victimes du devoir are explicitly called Realist. Dramatists have been struggling against Realism for the best part of the twentieth century.

The resistance of the Realist mode to this onslaught would seem to indicate that its assumptions about reality, identity, language and reason are basic to human experience. In the context of his analysis of Pinter's Betrayal Austin Quigley notes "the persisting strength of the well-made play" and goes on:

As all those who have written on the subject would agree, the structure of the well-made play is one that embodies an attitude towards explanation and truth that is not at all untypical of attitudes we frequently bring to bear on our own lives. There is, we usually feel, for any situation in which we find ourselves, a basic explanation. If we have not yet found it, we fault ourselves, not the situation.⁴⁴

Andrew Kennedy makes the point that the vision of reality expressed by modern dramatists is in fact difficult to live by. Quoting Strindberg's note to A Dream Play "Time and space do not exist..." he asks "How many of us live by such a belief or perception, even today?"⁴⁵ The point is, in fact, extremely Pirandellian. In the Premessa to Il fu Mattia Pascal, don Eligio Pellegrinatto remarks that no matter how hard we try to undermine the illusion we have of living in a man-centred universe "Per fortuna, l'uomo si distrae facilmente" (TR 269).

In the light of this, Realism may be considered part of a whole "Weltanschauung", a mode of consciousness deeply rooted in Western culture. That Pirandello and Ionesco are aware of the ahistorical aspects of Realism

is evident in their theoretical statements where they establish antitheses between writers whose work acknowledges the fragmentary nature of reality and consciousness and those whose works distort reality by imposing on it a unity and coherence foreign to it.⁴⁶

At the end of L'umorismo, Pirandello sees the humorist as challenging any concept of art which does not take into account the 'flux' of life, "l'impreveduto che è nella vita" and "l'abisso che è nelle anime":

L'arte in genere astrae e concentra, coglie cioè e rappresenta così degli individui come delle cose, l'idealità essenziale e caratteristica. Ora pare all'umorista che tutto ciò semplifichi troppo la natura e tenda a rendere troppo ragionevole o almeno troppo coerente la vita. Gli pare che delle cause, delle cause VERE che muovono spesso questa povera anima umana agli atti più inconsulti, assolutamente imprevedibili, l'arte in genere non tenga quel conto che secondo lui dovrebbe. Per l'umorista le cause, nella vita, non sono mai così logiche, così ordinate, come nelle nostre comuni opere d'arte, in cui tutto è, in fondo, combinato, congegnato, ordinati ai fini che lo scrittore s'è proposto (SPSV 157).

Ionesco too calls for art to recognise the true complexity of existence and of the human make-up. He accuses Realism of alienating man from his spirituality: "les réalités humaines les plus profondes: l'amour, la mort, l'étonnement, la souffrance et les rêves de nos coeurs extra-sociaux" (NCN 274). For Ionesco the great sin of Realism is to have reduced human beings to puppets and to have shut out the imagination: "Le réalisme, socialiste ou pas, est en deçà de la réalité. Il la rétrécit, l'atténue, la fausse,... Il présente l'homme dans une perspective réduite, aliénée;..." (NCN 48).

Although the issue of dramatic form is explicitly addressed in the action of Victimes du devoir and Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore, it is not the result of an elitist, introspective preoccupation with matters theatrical. Pirandello and Ionesco share with other twentieth century writers an awareness that the processes surrounding the creation and consumption of works of art are a microcosm of the processes of conscious-

ness. In both plays the problem of dramatic form is seen in terms of the human desire for unity. They present a group of characters in search of absolutes and in both plays the search fails when the characters confront the fluidity and multiplicity of life. This is a conflict which Quigley has identified as uniting the tremendous diversity of modern drama. "The notion of a single world with a single set of values is repeatedly brought into conflict with a concern for pluralistic worlds with pluralistic values."⁴⁷

Although in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore Pirandello is at pains to underline the role of the characters as "realità create, costruzioni della fantasia immutabili" (MN I 54), what emerges from the action of the play is the opposite: the characters' dilemma becomes a rich allegory, not of artistic creation, but of the human condition. Cut adrift from their creator, "sperduti", they seek an author who will complete their story, provide a conclusion which will untangle the many threads of their situation. They crave meaning, plenitude and transcendence: "Vogliamo vivere, signore!" (MN I 59).

One aspect of their absolutism is their insistence on complete accuracy of detail in the representation of their drama: the same clothes, furnishings, and props, the identical words, and time-scale. At each turn they are offered compromises and simplifications. Ostensibly in search of Realism, they are shown that the reality depicted by it is highly stylised, selective and shaped:

"Qua siamo a teatro! La verità fino a un certo punto!" (MN I 114)

"Combinarli [i fatti], aggrupparli in un'azione simultanea e serrata;" (MN I 106)

"Bisogna contener tutti in un quadro armonico e rappresentare quel che è rappresentabile" (MN I 97).

They are not only obstructed by the need to respect the artistic canons and

moral sensibilities of the time but also by the physical limitations of the stage itself: the impossibility of whispering in an intimate scene, or of playing two scenes simultaneously. But the characters are not merely in search of an accuracy of reproduction. Their real desire is for an impossible immediacy and directness, a purity and totality of expression. They want their drama to spill out onto the stage as they lived it, without the mediation of actors, directors, text and all the machinery of the theatre.

As the action of Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore progresses, it becomes evident that the play is not about theatre at all. Rather the theatre becomes a paradigm for all 'forms' and media. The discussions about staging persistently return to more fundamental issues such as the nature of language, perception and identity. At every stage something which the characters believed to be 'one' is revealed as multiple, relative and fragmented. Every building block of the staging is shown to contain its own drama of non-correspondence and misrepresentation. Their story itself has as many dramas as characters. Each wants to have his or her own particular viewpoint represented: "ma io voglio rappresentare il mio dramma! il mio!" (MN I 97). Not only can the characters not agree on the simple facts of their drama but they discover that none of a person's acts represents the totality of his being.

Il dramma per me è tutto qui, signore: nella coscienza che ho, che ciascuno di noi - veda - si crede "uno" ma non è vero: è "tanti", signore, "tanti" secondo tutte le possibilità d'essere che sono in noi: "uno" con questo, "uno" con quello - diversissimi. E con l'illusione, intanto, d'esser sempre "uno per tutti", e sempre "quest'uno" che ci crediamo, in ogni nostro atto (MN I 72).

This notion of an inner multiplicity which cannot be embodied or expressed in an external medium underlies all the conflicts in the play and ultimately undermines the very roots of human communication: words. With the Father's speech on the mechanisms of language, Pirandello effectively

suggests that all verbal communication is an illusion.

The paradox of Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore is that while demonstrating the impossibility not just of making a play but of all communication, Pirandello created a new kind of play whose artistic qualities are not based on unity of action and character. Its fragmented form, its many levels of meaning and broad scope of comment are all held together by the central theatrical metaphor.

In Victimes du devoir the potential of theatrical form to reflect the irrational complexity of human experience is one of a multiplicity of themes through which Ionesco shows various aspects of the urge to unity, such as the tendency to create systems and conventions and to resist change. The notion of "duty" in the title alone is dense with suggestion. "Duty" comes to represent all that is secondhand and accepted automatically, without thought. Ionesco associates it both with the tendency to shut out alternatives and with the way people lose sight of the essential issues.

This thematic density and the efficiency with which Ionesco breaks Realist dramatic conventions caused Geneviève Serreau to comment that "cette richesse même - de thèmes, de tons, de styles - nuit à l'unité de la pièce" - a remark which indicates just how deeply rooted the idea of unity in art is.⁴⁸

The theme of dramatic form arises first in the context of a discussion about change. "Penses-tu vraiment que l'on puisse faire du nouveau au théâtre?" (TH I 165) Choubert puts forward the view that all plays ever written have been identical.

Toutes les pièces qui ont été écrites, depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours, n'ont jamais été que policières. Le théâtre n'a jamais été que réaliste et policier. Toute pièce est une enquête menée à bonne fin. Il y a une énigme, qui nous est révélée à la dernière scène. Quelquefois, avant. On cherche, on trouve. Autant tout révéler dès le début (TH I 165).

The detective who enters shortly after this is looking for "Mallot avec un t". The ensuing ruthless investigation begins in Choubert's conscious memory and descends into his unconscious. The findings undermine both the positivist belief in the ordered and rational nature of the universe and the assumptions of psychoanalysis that the complexity of the mind can be reduced to fixed patterns. The detective comes up against irrelevancies such as Choubert's obsessions, his fear of death and his relationship with his father. As the search goes deeper into Choubert's unconscious the information gleaned becomes more and more fragmented and vague. The descent becomes a parody of the journey to the centre or to the Underworld.

... des sortes de rues ... des sortes de chemins ... des sortes de lacs ... des sortes de gens ... des sortes de nuits ... des sortes de cieux ... une sorte de monde ... Des ombres se réveillent ... Une nostalgie, des déchirures, les bribes d'un univers... Un trou béant... (TH I 187).

The conclusion is that Choubert is full of holes and contradictions. The staging of this investigation also violates Realist conventions. Consistent characterisation and motivated rational behaviour are absent: the detective changes from a meek young man into a bullying interrogator. His lust for knowledge of Mallot leads him to sacrifice Choubert's feelings to the quest, so that Victimes du devoir, like Così è (se vi pare), suggests the sadism into which truth seekers are drawn. During the journey through Choubert's unconscious, both Madeleine and the Detective adopt the roles which the inner drama demands. This shift into the character's mind is similar to the evocation of Madame Pace in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore which Pirandello describes as "un improvviso mutamento del piano di realtà della scena" (MN I 44). Ionesco not only violates the unity of action and place, by jumping backwards and forwards in time, and in and out of waking and oneiric reality but he introduces an extraneous character who merely sits and watches the others.

The antithesis between unity and disorder is perpetuated after the psycho-journey by the unmotivated entrance of Nicolas d'Eu, who serves to represent the avant-garde artist. He is bearded and scruffy and looks like "quelqu'un qui vient de se réveiller ..." (TH I 201). He arouses suspicion in the Detective who represents the values of obedience, nationalism and conformism. The theme of 'duty' is expanded when Madeleine suddenly begins to "do her duty" as a hostess to guests and brings in hundreds of coffee cups. In her automatism ("elle ne voit plus personne" (TH I 201)), she does her duty but has no interest in the effects.

The filling up of the stage space with cups finds a parallel in the Detective's decision to fill Choubert with dry bread in order to remedy his empty condition: "il est déséquilibré, il n'adhère pas à la réalité" (TH I 200). The following scene of force-feeding, reminiscent of La Leçon, provides an image for Ionesco's notion that in the absence of a 'given' absolute reality, human beings fill the void with matter.

When Nicolas d'Eu expounds his vision of a non-Aristotelian theatre, he describes the very features of the play the audience is witnessing:

Je rêve d'un théâtre irrationaliste. [...] Le théâtre actuel, en effet, est encore prisonnier de ses vieilles formes, il n'est pas allé au-delà de la psychologie d'un Paul Bourget... [...] Le théâtre actuel, voyez-vous, cher ami, ne correspond pas au style culturel de notre époque, il n'est pas en accord avec l'ensemble des manifestations de l'esprit de notre temps... [...] Il est pourtant nécessaire de tenir compte de la nouvelle logique, des révélations qu'apporte une psychologie nouvelle... une psychologie des antagonismes... [...] M'inspirant d'une autre logique et d'une autre psychologie, j'apporterais de la contradiction dans la non-contradiction, de la non-contradiction dans ce que le sens commun juge contradictoire... Nous abandonnerons le principe de l'identité et de l'unité des caractères, au profit du mouvement, d'une psychologie dynamique... Nous ne sommes pas nous-mêmes... La personnalité n'existe pas. Il n'y a en nous que des forces contradictoires ou non contradictoires... [...] Les caractères perdent leur forme dans l'informe du devenir. [...] Quant à l'action et à la causalité, n'en parlons plus. [...] Plus de drame ni de tragédie: le tragique se fait comique, le comique est tragique, ... (TH I 204-5).

Choubert hammers home the point: "vous abandonnez ainsi... unité..." (TH

I 205). From this it might be assumed that Nicolas d'Eu is the mouthpiece of the author, but the ending of the play alters this interpretation while not undermining the validity of the dramatic theory. Despite the findings of his investigations the Detective asserts his staunch belief in unity: "Je demeure, quant'à moi, aristotéliquement logique, fidèle avec moi-même, fidèle à mon devoir, respectueux de mes chefs... Je ne crois pas à l'absurde, tout est cohérent, tout devient compréhensible... Avale! ... grâce à l'effort de la pensée humaine et de la science" (TH I 205). In spite of their antithetical positions Nicolas d'Eu declares "vous n'êtes pas de mon avis. Je ne vous en veux pas" (TH I 205). But this is contradicted by his sudden violent interest in the Detective's treatment of Choubert. When Nicolas finally murders the Detective it would seem that Choubert has been freed of his torturer, but in fact Nicolas now takes up the search for Mallot and "avec la voix du Policier" begins to force-feed Choubert, joined by Madeleine and the silent Lady.

The character who appeared to be the hero or the most enlightened person becomes a tyrant in his turn once he has gained power. The suggestion is that any ideology, belief, system or dramatic theory will become oppressive once it is established. All beliefs fall into the same "absolutist" rut. Choubert suffers anyway, whether he is under the Detective or Nicolas. The end of the play with all the characters force-feeding each other is a brutal image of how all social relations inevitably involve conflict, power and oppression. As soon as we so much as state our beliefs we are automatically creating the conditions for conflict. The point is made very succinctly in a later play, Jeux de massacre:

On peut presque tout pardonner, mais on ne peut pardonner à quelqu'un qui a d'autres idées que vous. Celui qui pense autrement est un ennemi (TH V 36).

Nicolas d'Eu is led to kill the Detective not out of any personal hatred

but because their opposing views prescribe such behaviour. We are inevitably victims of our systems. The mechanism illustrated by the play is in fact stated right at the beginning when Madeleine and Choubert discuss the new recommendations of the Administration:

Pour l'instant, l'Administration ne fait encore que recommander amicalement cette solution suprême. Ne soyons pas dupes: nous savons parfaitement que la recommandation tourne toujours en commandement. [...] Nous savons que les suggestions prennent brusquement figure de règlement, de lois sévères (TH I 164).

Form is shown to become oppressive as soon as it is produced. But this is not so much the fault of form itself but of the unitarian urge in human beings which makes them expect too much of their systems and apply them rigidly. Victimes du devoir shows that if dramatic form can express admirably the contradictions of life and be flexible, the human mind is not. It is always drawn into the same patterns of behaviour. Dramatic form will change, but not human nature. It is a case of "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose". The impotence of forms really to change anything is suggested most graphically when the discussion about the theatre between Nicolas and the Detective is juxtaposed with the torturing of Choubert. Ionesco seems to be suggesting that to be engrossed in artistic theory, of whatever kind, is to be as distracted by the non-essential as Madeleine is.

Victimes du devoir and Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore offer a plethora of similarities of theme and form. The final difference in emphasis in their conclusions about the nature of dramatic form is negligible given the deeply-rooted pessimism of their overall vision.⁴⁹ Furthermore, in other texts, Ionesco is as pessimistic about words as Pirandello is.⁵⁰ Both authors locate the problem in the functioning of the human mind whether it be the 'tools' or the manner of their use. Again, this is a feature of modern drama as a whole, not only of the work of Pirandello and Ionesco. As Quigley says: "Again and again we are invited

to see ourselves not just as the beneficiaries, but also as the victims of our modes of intelligibility, ..."51 But behind the lack of connection at the level of social relations in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco there lies the all-pervasive disjunction evoked by Kafka: "What I write is different from what I say, what I say is different from what I think, what I think is different from what I ought to think and so it goes on further into the deepest darkness."52

NOTES

¹ In 1543 Copernicus published his theory that the sun not the earth was the centre of the universe, or what is now called the Solar System. The Ptolemaic system challenged by Copernicus' theory had pictured the earth at rest in the centre of the universe, while the sun, moon, planets and stars revolved round it. Copernicus not only threw the earth out of the centre but also out of its state of rest, setting it in a double movement, rotating on its own axis once a day and revolving round the sun once a year.

² Here Pirandello refers to and has clearly taken his inspiration from Leopardi's Dialogo "Il Copernico" in which the Sun complains: "io sono stanco di questo continuo andare attorno per far lume a quattro animaluzzi, che vivono in su un pugno di fango, tanto piccino, che io, che ho buona vista, non lo arrivo a vedere: ..." (*I Canti, Operette Morali*, ed. F. Montanari et al. (Rome: Casa Editrice Bietti, 1978), p.513.

³ Both quoted in "The Name and Nature of Modernism" by M. Bradbury and J. MacFarlane in *Modernism*, eds. M. Bradbury and J. MacFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p.33.

⁴ Raymond Williams sees the regulation of different levels of life by different criteria as a distinctive feature of the modern age. "The deepest crisis in modern literature is the division of experience into social and personal categories." *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966; rev.ed., Verso, 1979), p.121.

⁵ The confusion is illustrated by the passage in JM 117-118.

⁶ "The World of Ionesco", Tulane Drama Review, 3, 1 (October 1958), p.46.

⁷ See JM, 146; NCN 230.

⁸ Ionesco claims he has been influenced by Kafka's short story "Le Poing" which is a reinterpretation of the Tower of Babel legend. Kafka has the Tower destroyed by God, not because men had the audacity to want to reach Heaven from Earth, but because they were distracted from this goal by all the organisation for the building of the Tower - union disputes, working conditions, housing problems. Ionesco draws the conclusion:

"Des buts secondaires masquent donc le But principal et les préoccupations d'embellissement de la ville et du confort font, finalement, perdre complètement de vue l'essentiel, le problème des fins dernières" (NCN 343).

See also ECB 166.

⁹ The passage is quoted almost verbatim from Il fu Mattia Pascal, TR 397.

¹⁰ Adriano Tilgher, Studi sul teatro contemporaneo (Rome: Libreria di Scienze e Lettere, 1923), p.162.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.162.

¹² Compare MN I 139 with SPSV 149-150: "Le barriere, i limiti che noi poniamo alla nostra coscienza, sono anch'essi illusioni, sono le condizioni dell'apparire della nostra individualità relativa; ma nella realtà, quei limiti non esistono punto."

¹³ See SPSV 150-1:

"... è un risorgere e un assopirsi continuo di affetti, di tendenze, di idee; un fluttuare incessante fra termini contadittorii, e un oscillare fra poli opposti, come la speranza e la paura, il vero e il falso, il bello e il brutto, il giusto e l'ingiusto e via dicendo."

¹⁴ See MN I 172: "... E poi le immagini di cento cose che ci attraversano di continuo la mente e che, senza saperlo, ci fanno d'improvviso cangiar d'umore".

¹⁵ SPSV 23.

¹⁶ An interesting aspect of this play is the way it illustrates how Pirandello's Sicilian background with its codes of honour and emphasis on keeping up appearances may have sown the seeds of the author's very modern understanding of the nature of language.

¹⁷ "The World of Ionesco", p.46.

¹⁸ Ionesco's accounts of the creation of his plays often present such contradictions. As Bernard de Bear Nicol rightly says, "He rather likes to adopt the role of the inspired amateur but when one examines his plays they are in every case (with the possible exception of one or two soggy endings, Amédée, for instance) well made, not indeed in the Sardou sense, but well made to suit their theme and nature; ..." Varieties of Dramatic Experience, ed. B. de Bear Nicol (London: University of London Press, 1969), p.265.

¹⁹ Ionesco rightly points out that to criticise an art form is to indirectly criticise a view of reality: "... if it is a criticism of anything, it must be of all societies, of language, of clichés - a parody of human behaviour and therefore a parody of the theatre too". "The World of Ionesco", p.46.

²⁰ "Notes sur la névrose et le théâtre" quoted in E.M. Donnachie, "The Early Plays of Eugène Ionesco and their Comic Techniques of Disintegration" (PhD Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1972). Epigraph on title page.

²¹ This device is exploited to great effect by Beckett in En Attendant Godot:

Estragon: Alors on y va?

Vladimir: Allons-y.

Ils ne bougent pas.

Ed. C. Duckworth (London: Harrap, 1966), p.48.

²² Doro Palegari in Ciascuno a suo modo refers to the way in which language runs away with us: "Quello che lo detto, non lo so! Una parola tira l'altra!" (MN I 136).

23 One of Roberte's stories is interpreted by Jacques as being about cancer (TH I 123). This suggests again that his 'submission' is linked to fear of death.

24 "The fell disease of 'rhinoceritis' is the condemnation, not of any ideology to which man may feel the urge to conform, but specifically of the Nazi ideology." Richard N. Coe, Ionesco, Writers and Critics (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), p.90. The unpublished essay is quoted on pp.92-3.

25 The play presents a parallel here with Max Frisch's Biedermann und die Brandstifter which also took its inspiration from the birth of a totalitarian state.

26 In an interview Ionesco toys with the idea that those who resist ideologies might represent "la conscience universelle", "La vérité contre l'histoire" (NCN 285).

27 See also NCN 287-8 where Ionesco explains how ideologies "rendent impossible l'amitié malgré tout des hommes entre eux; ..."

28 Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p.180.

29 However, a sense of life as transcendental farce, as God's joke on man, is evident elsewhere, notably in Ce formidable bordel. See also JM 45, 35.

30 See MN I 1018, 1041, 1064, 1065.

31 My ideas in this section are greatly indebted to two studies in particular:

Robert Champigny, "Designation and Gesture in The Chairs" in The Two Faces of Ionesco, ed. Rosette C. Lamont and Melvin J. Friedman (Troy, New York: Whitson Publishing Company, 1978), pp.155-174.

and

Austin E. Quigley, The Modern Stage and Other Worlds (New York: Methuen, 1985).

32 Letter to Sylvain Dhomme in Spectacles, Juillet 1956. Quoted by Geneviève Serreau in Histoire du 'Nouveau Théâtre' (Gallimard. nrf, 1966), pp.45-6.

The problems Ionesco had with the image of the rhinoceros were similar to those of the image of the chairs. He could not make a play out of an image, as images are static and have no duration. Ionesco needed some action to lead up to the final image of emptiness, so he was faced with the paradoxical task of expressing nothingness through its opposite - words, characters, action, etc. (see NCN 264). Although Ionesco wrote to Sylvain Dhomme that "Le thème de la pièce n'est pas le message, ni les échecs dans la vie, ni le désastre moral des vieux, ...", Les Chaises is very much a play to which Bernard de Bear Nicol's words, quoted above in note 18, apply.

33 See Tueur sans gages and Le Nouveau Locataire.

34 In one of his programme notes Ionesco emphasises the couples' reaching out for some kind of solid reality:

C'est ce sentiment d'irréalité, la recherche d'une réalité essentielle, oubliée, innommée - hors de laquelle je ne me sens pas être - que j'ai voulu exprimer à travers mes personnages qui errent dans l'incohérent, n'ayant rien en propre en dehors de leurs angoisses, leurs remords, leurs échecs, la vacuité de leur vie (NCN 261).

35 Ionesco explains that the orator's "visibilité n'est qu'une simple convention arbitraire, née d'une difficulté technique insurmontable autrement" (NCN 265).

36 Pirandello's title for his collected plays "Maschere nude" expresses the same idea.

37 In Champigny's terms "the play appears as a global critique of the mythical perspective on social roles", p.168.

I cannot agree with Bernard de Bear Nicol's idea that the couple's final exit implies that in the face of the failure of words and messengers "We must take our chance and jump, alone, into the void of unknowing" (Varieties of Dramatic Experience, p.265). The couple do not witness the orator's performance and so retain their faith in 'media' right until the end.

38 Olga Ragusa, "Pirandello and Verga", in Narrative and Drama (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p.58.

39 In Champigny's terms: "The neutralisation of designative meaning sets off the gestural", p.167.

40 Andrew Kennedy, Dramatic Dialogue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.200-201.

41 Gabriele Schwab, "On the dialectic of closing and opening in Samuel Beckett's Endgame", Yale French Studies, No.67, (1964), p.196.

42 Ibid., p.193.

43 J.A.F. Van Zyl, "Social Realism in British Drama after 1956" (PhD Dissertation, University of Witwatersrand, 1973), p.278.

44 Quigley, p.223.

45 Kennedy, p.201.

46 Pirandello talks of "gli scrittori ordinari" and "l'umorista" whereas Ionesco's terms are "bourgeois" and "avant-garde".

47 Quigley, p.9.

48 Serreau, pp.49-50.

⁴⁹ Pirandello's play is, of course, ambivalent. While its content is the impossibility of making a play, its very status as a play contradicts that theme.

⁵⁰ See for example JM 42, 88.

⁵¹ Quigley, p.20.

⁵² Letter, July 1914, quoted in "The Crisis of Language" by Richard Sheppard, in Modernism, eds. Bradbury and MacFarlane, p.328.

CHAPTER II

FROM THE ABSURD TO MYSTICISM

I Introduction

The conflict which I have identified as lying at the heart of the work of Pirandello and Ionesco is also the conflict at the heart of the Absurd. The word 'Absurd', as originally used by Camus and Sartre, referred to a personal, subjective experience and as such it is described, with variations, in the works of Pirandello and Ionesco in passages to be examined in this chapter. Such a personal experience is seen to give rise to an epistemological and existential crisis of such proportions that it demands a radical re-examination of the universe and all human actions. Much of what has come to be called the literature of the Absurd performs this task and the work of Pirandello and Ionesco falls into this category. The so-called Theatre of the Absurd is informed by the Absurd worldview and, as Martin Esslin points out, it also aspires to make the whole theatrical form express or embody Absurdity.¹ The Absurd ceases to be the subject of dialogue, or an event in the plot, and becomes the main quality of the consciousness of the creative artist which results in the twentieth century phenomenon known as Absurdist art.

The Absurd might be identified as the 'Zeitgeist' of the mid-years of the twentieth century; a perennial individual experience has become the basis of the world picture of an entire age. While Ionesco's output covers the middle of the century, Pirandello may be seen as an Absurdist ante litteram. Antonio Illiano considers Il fu Mattia Pascal (1904) "the first absurdist classic of modern literature".²

The double nature of the Absurd as an eternal experience but also a historical and artistic phenomenon has apparently given rise to some confusion in criticism.³ W.I. Oliver, in an attempt to remedy what he calls a "critical Babel", claims that the Absurd has suffered from the tendency in criticism "to focus too quickly and exclusively on the stylistic breed without stressing the philosophical genus". He maintains that the important and distinguishing feature of absurdist dramatists is "their subject and not their craft" and he goes on to say that on this basis

... we create an instantaneous bond between all manner of writers such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Adamov, Miller, O'Neill, Brecht, Pirandello, Unamuno, Sartre and Camus. Furthermore, we find no difficulty in making comparisons between the works of the current generation of absurdist and their historical ancestors, the Greek tragedians and farceurs as well as the great dramatists of the English Renaissance (including Shakespeare).⁴

Being a worldview deduced from a personal experience, the Absurd has developed philosophical links. Its association with Camus and Sartre can give the misleading impression that it is a system of thought and a product of polemical minds. In fact the very vocabulary of twentieth century Absurdism points to its origin as subjective, a gut feeling resulting from direct personal experience. Words such as nausea, stupor, heaviness, terror and anguish abound. As Sartre's Roquentin says following his experience before the tree root, "L'absurdité, ce n'était pas une idée dans ma tête, ni un souffle de voix, mais ce long serpent mort à mes pieds, ce serpent de bois."⁵ Even the forms in which the seminal documents of Absurdism are written indicate that they spring from harrowing personal experiences. Adamov's L'Aveu as the title suggests is as deeply confessional and as fragmented as Ionesco's journals Journal en miettes, Présent passé passé présent and La Quête intermittente. Such forms are the result of minds desperately attempting to make sense of experience. Written as they are out of striving and straining and not from a position of meditative calm, they are naturally repetitive and amorphous. Their authors may

theorise about existence but neither displays the methodological or logical rigour of the professional philosopher. Although Camus' Le Mythe de Sisyphe – possibly the clearest and most influential definition of Absurdity – is in the form of a philosophical essay with structured sections and erudite references, it is significant that it was written, as Camus himself points out in his preface to the English translation, in 1940 "amidst the French and European disaster", by a man suffering from chronic tuberculosis.⁶ Its subject is suicide: to be or not to be. The eloquence of its style burns with a sense of the urgency of its subject matter.

W.I. Oliver makes the point that "an absurdist playwright is one who is predominantly thematic in his dramaturgy. That is to say, these are dramatists of a philosophical bent who place the greatest value on their thematic statement."⁷ Pirandello and Ionesco both wrote out of an inner compulsion and not primarily out of polemical or 'political' interests, and the desire to communicate a whole vision of life has quite concrete effects on their work. Pirandello's characters repeatedly describe in abstract terms the view of the cosmos which explains their actions or the vicissitudes of their life. Ionesco's characters are not as overtly existential in their statements but nonetheless reflect the outlook expounded in his notebooks and journals. In both authors, fictional and non-fictional works frequently echo each other verbatim in statements, emblems, metaphors, examples and motifs. There are constant cross references and borrowings in Pirandello between plays and prose-works, sometimes lasting several pages, and Ionesco in the same way uses incidents recorded in his journals directly in his plays and récits, some of them in the same words. Constant repetition and the use of direct personal statement in fiction give their writing an obsessive quality.

The Absurd then may be viewed as a type of consciousness or sensibility, as indeed Camus makes clear in a note at the beginning of Le Mythe de

Sisyphé:

Les pages qui suivent traitent d'une sensibilité absurde qu'on peut trouver éparse dans le siècle – et non d'une philosophie absurde que notre temps, à proprement parler, n'a pas connue.... On trouvera seulement ici la description, à l'état pur, d'un mal d'esprit. Aucune métaphysique, aucune croyance n'y sont mêlées pour le moment.⁸

Camus's essay, acclaimed as the essential absurdist manifesto, also provides an interesting point of reference and bridge between Pirandello and Ionesco. It is permeated with 'Pirandellian' vocabulary – references to masks, theatrical metaphors, artifice and a sense of the mechanical nature of some aspects of human behaviour. At the same time the essay touches on some of the ways in which Ionesco sees the Absurd – outstandingly his sense of amazement before the 'farce' of life with its routines and habits and his desperate need to understand. It serves to reinforce the opinion that Pirandello's worldview is entirely consonant with the Absurd one.

The word 'absurd' originally meant inharmonious or out of harmony in a musical context. In the first chapter of this thesis I showed that Pirandello and Ionesco see human forms and systems as being out of harmony with the true nature of the human condition. We have seen Pirandello in particular depicting the behaviour of characters who make the traumatic discovery of an alternative reality or a 'beyond', and so far my illustrations have focused on the occasions when that discovery serves to reveal the falsity of human concepts and their limiting nature. The revelation of the unconscious or of human irrationality may lead to the questioning of the concepts of identity, guilt and judgement. Sometimes the disturbing discovery is of the possibility of seeing things in many ways, of the relativity of truth and of the flawed nature of human perception. Such discoveries constitute in a sense the first stage of the Absurd, which

calls for a revaluation of concepts and language which are no longer in accord with what we know about reality and human nature. This is the historical dimension of the Absurd which protests against the dehumanisation of people in a mechanised, mass society. Ionesco has acknowledged this historical element:

... dire que le monde est absurde, par exemple, c'est l'interpréter, c'est dire que la forme qui est constituée par nous-mêmes ne nous correspond plus. Dire que le monde est absurde, c'est critiquer l'image que nous nous en sommes faite (ANT 258).

In this light the Absurd emerges as a radical critique of the man-made world, a protest against its loss of contact with a vital human reality, lamenting the emptiness of modern civilisation. The Absurd writer, for Ionesco, looks back at a time when language was an instrument of integrity and purity: "... on appelle quelquefois l'absurde ce qui n'est que la dénonciation du caractère dérisoire d'un langage vidé de sa substance, stérile, fait de clichés et de slogans;..." (NCN 83-4).

Disjunction is the fundamental characteristic of what Ionesco calls 'moral' or 'practical' absurdity: "Dès qu'il y a décalage entre l'idéologie et la réalité, il y a absurde." He sees this type of absurdity as man-made, "voulu par l'homme" (ECB 138). This tendency of human forms to become distanced from the reality they were intended to embody means, for Ionesco, that all those forms must constantly be scrutinised: "Il faudrait qu'il y ait un travail constant d'élucidation, de précision, pour abolir 'l'absurde' politique ... qui est autre que l'absurde fondamental" (ECB 139). It is this "absurde fondamental" or "l'absurde métaphysique" which is the focus of this chapter. This is the type of Absurdity which people associate most closely with the Theatre of the Absurd. These levels are perceptible in Pirandello if one considers Pensaci Giacomino and Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore: in the former disjunction is a social problem, in the latter it carries added ontological and artistic associations.

Whereas the first stage of the Absurd registers a feeling of separation from the human, conventional world, the second stage involves the turning away from that world and the seeking of comfort and unity in the non-human world, with the resulting discovery that the human race is out of harmony with the natural world too and that existence is an exile. Absurd man sees himself as doubly exiled with the added problem that he does not know from what he is exiled. So for Ionesco "Ce qui m'apparaît absurde, insolite au premier degré, c'est l'existence en soi." (ECB 138).

Ionesco is not the only writer to distinguish between a historical absurdity and an eternal one. A similar distinction is present in the novels of Malraux, though in a less theoretical form. Malraux had considerable experience of Oriental cultures and consequently could view the Absurd as a product of specifically Western, European values as well as of "la condition humaine".

II The Spirit of the Absurd

Camus begins his consideration of Absurdity in Le Mythe de Sisyphe by referring to the historical element in the experience, namely the position of twentieth century civilisation deprived of a theocentric view of the world to explain human existence. The human race has no origins and no destination:

Un monde qu'on peut expliquer même avec de mauvaises raisons est un monde familier. Mais au contraire, dans un univers soudain privé d'illusions et de lumières, l'homme se sent un étranger. Cet exil est sans recours puisqu'il est privé des souvenirs d'une patrie perdue ou de l'espoir d'une terre promise. Ce divorce entre l'homme et sa vie, l'acteur et son décor, c'est proprement le sentiment de l'absurdité (LMS 18).

Divorce and estrangement are central motifs here. Bereft of their religious beliefs, humans are thrown back on their own resources and it is here that their exile becomes total, for they find that human forms and systems fail them too. With the Absurd the work of Copernicus is complete. Small wonder then that the first emotion of Absurdity is simply a blind feeling of separation. "Je suis séparé. Ce dont je suis séparé, je ne sais pas le nommer. Mais je suis séparé." declares Adamov in L'Aveu.⁹ A sense of self-division is ubiquitous in Pirandello, Ionesco, Adamov and Le Mythe de Sisyphe. "Entre moi et moi, il y a toujours écart".¹⁰ Ionesco is more specific than Adamov and describes how he is fragmented even by his own past acts and, like Beckett's Krapp, feels alienated by his own use of language:

Je suis perdu dans les milliers de mots et d'actes manqués qui sont 'ma vie', qui désarticulent, qui détruisent mon âme. Cette vie, elle est entre moi et moi-même, je ne la reconnais pas comme mienne,... (PPPP 248).

... l'expérience d'être perdu dans le monde, séparé, perdu dans le langage et dans mon propre langage que je sentais ne plus être le mien mais celui des autres (PPPP 249).

This lack of oneness with the external structures of one's life is experi-

enced also on the physical level. Camus talks of "cette incalculable chute devant l'image de ce que nous sommes" and describes something very similar to the Pirandellian mirror moment as being one of the sources of the Absurd: "De même l'étranger qui, à certaines secondes, vient à notre rencontre dans une glace, le frère familier et pourtant inquiétant que nous retrouvons dans nos propres photographies, c'est encore l'absurde" (LMS 29).

From these examples it is clear that the Absurd stems from a dramatic encounter between inner and outer worlds, between the individual's subjective experience of the world and of himself, and the exterior, communal forms in which experience must be expressed. It is not difficult to see how the Pirandellian Life-Form antithesis holds the Absurd within its scope. Camus eloquently sums it up as "cet esprit et ce monde arc boutés l'un contre l'autre sans pouvoir s'embrasser" (LMS 60). He is particularly perceptive on the point that 'it takes two to create Absurdity', that it is the clash of two irreconcilable poles or impulses:

Je disais que le monde est absurde et j'allais trop vite. Ce monde en lui-même pas raisonnable, c'est tout ce qu'on peut dire. Mais ce qui est absurde, c'est la confrontation de cet irrationnel et ce désir éperdu de clarté dont l'appel résonne au plus profond de l'homme (LMS 37).

The Absurd, then, is intimately connected with the functioning of the Pirandellian "macchinetta infernale", human reason, which is the principal tool, besides the senses, which humans use in their dealings with the world. Camus attaches great importance to the fragmenting action of the mind. He sees it as alienating us not only from the world but also from our own sensations and creations. In its very attempt to grasp the world it distances it:

Car si, franchissant le gouffre qui sépare le désir de la conquête, nous affirmons avec Parménide la réalité de l'Un (quel qu'il soit), nous tombons dans la ridicule contradiction d'un esprit qui affirme l'unité totale et prouve par son affirmation même sa propre différence et la diversité qu'il prétendait

résoudre (LMS 33).

Camus sees the mind as being able to judge that the world exists through the evidence of the senses but it cannot ratify or explain that existence by any other means. Whatever the mind applies itself to, it destroys or alters. Camus, like Pirandello, depicts the rational mind as a deadly abstracting machine and a fabricator of constructions. I can reach and touch the world, he says, and "Là s'arrête toute ma science, le reste est construction. Car si j'essaie de saisir ce moi dont je m'assure, si j'essaie de le définir et de le résumer, il n'est plus qu'une eau qui coule entre mes doigts" (LMS 34). Humans can describe isolated aspects of the world and create categories by enumerating similarities but when they have put all this together, they are no closer to grasping reality. The mind can produce no forms to equal the certainty and fullness provided by the senses. Science for all its laws ultimately descends into hypotheses, conjecture and metaphor to describe what it cannot see directly.¹¹ The end result of this, for Camus as for Pirandello and Ionesco, is solitude and a sense of having been born into a trap, a labyrinth of paradoxes which seem to mock us:

Ce coeur même qui est le mien, me restera à jamais indéfinissable. ... Pour toujours, je serais étranger à moi-même.... Je comprends que si je puis par la science saisir les phénomènes et les énumérer, je ne puis pour autant appréhender le monde.... Étranger à moi-même et à ce monde, armé pour tout secours d'une pensée qui se nie elle-même dès qu'elle affirme, quelle est cette condition où je ne puis avoir la paix qu'en refusant de savoir et de vivre, où l'appétit de conquête se heurte à des murs qui défient mes assauts? (LMS 34-36).

In many ways Camus gives us the key to Pirandello's Donn'Anna Luna of La vita che ti diedi. She maintains the coherence of her world only on condition of withdrawal from the outside world and of the silencing of her reason. As soon as she is called upon to engage with reality her 'order' crumbles.

Tant que l'esprit se taît dans le monde immobile de ses espoirs,

tout se reflète et s'ordonne dans l'unité de sa nostalgie. Mais à son premier mouvement, ce monde se fêle et s'écroule: une infinité d'éclats miroitants s'offrent à la connaissance. Il faut désespérer d'en reconstruire jamais la surface familière et tranquille qui nous donnerait la paix du coeur (LMS 33-4).

What emerges then from Camus' analysis is that the human mind – the very thing which makes us human – is our own worst enemy. The Absurd involves the acknowledgement of that fact, and despair at the stalemate which results. "L'absurde, c'est la raison lucide qui constate ses limites" (LMS 70). It is impossible not to think of Béranger's final monologue at the end of Tueur sans gages when reading these passages of Camus' essay:

... l'homme se trouve devant l'irrationnel. Il sent en lui son désir de bonheur et de raison. L'absurde naît de cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde (LMS 44-5).

Human nature and the world would seem to be incompatible. Ionesco too associates the Absurd with reason and the human mind reaching the limits of their powers and failing to circumscribe reality:

Parfois, j'appelle absurde ce que je ne comprends pas, parce que c'est moi qui ne peux comprendre ou parce que c'est la chose qui est essentiellement incompréhensible, impénétrable, fermée,... (ECB 137).

and he goes on to relate this feeling to his recurrent dream of a wall which he cannot climb or pass through. A sense of helplessness is integral to the Absurd. In the work of Kafka, a major influence on both Camus and Ionesco, the feeling of being a victim of powerful forces is particularly strong. The relationship between the modern Absurd and that of classical writers and Shakespeare can be clearly seen here. The perception that "as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods" is replicated today in the situation of being a numbered file on the desk of an anonymous civil servant.

In the context of this thesis Camus is most illuminating in his analysis of the impulse behind the human "désir éperdu de clarté": the need for unity. The usual way of satisfying the craving for unity is to

reduce the world to human terms by using the rational mind. In this way unity is also linked with familiarity - we comprehend (in both senses of the word) the world by encompassing the concrete otherness of it within our abstract categories:

Quels que soient les jeux de mots et les acrobaties de la logique, comprendre c'est avant tout unifier. Le désir profond de l'esprit même dans ses démarches les plus évoluées rejoint le sentiment inconscient de l'homme devant son univers: il est exigence de familiarité, appétit de clarté. Comprendre le monde pour un homme, c'est le réduire à l'humain, le marquer de son sceau.... Si la pensée découvrait dans les miroirs changeants des phénomènes, des relations éternelles qui les puissent résumer et se résumer elles-mêmes en un principe unique, on pourrait parler d'un bonheur de l'esprit dont le mythe des bienheureux ne serait qu'une ridicule contre-façon. Cette nostalgie d'unité, cet appétit d'absolu illustre le mouvement essentiel du drame humain (LMS 32).

For Ionesco "la situation dramatique dans sa vérité originelle" lies precisely in the frustration of that desire for unity, in the confrontation with the impenetrable mystery of existence and with the limits of human understanding:

... le fait de se rendre compte qu'on est homme, de se sentir là dans cette situation, face à face avec le monde que je ne sens presque jamais mien, situation inconfortable mais primordiale, fondamentale (ECB 65).

III(i) The Absurd Experience

In Chapter One it was shown that Pirandello and Ionesco perceive that the combined action of the absolutist impulse to unity and the reductive functioning of the rational mind leads to human beings cocooning themselves inside their anthropomorphic concepts and cutting themselves off from the wider reality of the world beyond their own constructed one.

The quintessential moment in the Absurd experience, occurs when the man-made view disintegrates and the world rises up to confront the individual in its nudity. Facing the world directly for the first time, without the mediation of human constructions, a person is struck by two things, according to Absurdist writers: the impotence of all human systems, the failure of the mind to grasp reality in its fullness, and following on from this, the foreignness of the outside world. There ensues a feeling of being negated and dwarfed by the solidity and fixity of the material world. In the following example from Le Mythe de Sisyphe this awareness is brought about when a person faces nature or a landscape. Other precipitating factors will be discussed later.

Au fond de toute beauté gît quelque chose d'inhumain et ces collines, la douceur du ciel, ces dessins d'arbres, voici qu'à la minute même, ils perdent le sens illusoire dont nous les revêtons, désormais plus lointains qu'un paradis perdu. L'hostilité primitive du monde, à travers les millénaires, remonte vers nous. Pour une seconde, nous ne le comprenons plus puisque pendant des siècles nous n'avons compris en lui que les figures et les dessins que préalablement nous y mettions, puisque désormais les forces nous manquent pour user de cet artifice. Le monde nous échappe puisqu'il redevient lui-même. Ces décors masqués par l'habitude redeviennent ce qu'ils sont. Ils s'éloignent de nous
(LMS 28-9).¹²

From this new perspective human reality is seen to be a décor, a mask or a piece of 'clothing' which has been imposed on the world and which by habit, convention and tradition has been mistaken for the world itself. There follows a realisation that perception has been imbued with fiction and that reality lay elsewhere.

The definitive description of this experience in Pirandello's work is found in L'umorismo. All the elements of Camus' account are present: the notion of existence laid bare; the same metaphor of stripping off the illusory and fictitious human meanings from the world; the contact with a reality beyond forms which occurs in a flash and yet has a timeless quality; the sense of emptiness vertigo and purposelessness; the disintegration of normal reality so that thereafter it is discredited and seems mechanical and shabby:

In certi momenti di silenzio interiore, in cui l'anima nostra si spoglia di tutte le finzioni abituali, e gli occhi nostri diventano piú acuti e piú penetranti, noi vediamo noi stessi nella vita, e in se stessa la vita, quasi in una nudità arida, inquietante; ci sentiamo assaltare da una strana impressione, come se, in un baleno, ci si chiarisse una realtà diversa da quella che normalmente percepiamo, una realtà vivente oltre la vista umana, fuori delle forme dell'umana ragione. Lucidissimamente allora la compagine dell'esistenza quotidiana, quasi sospesa nel vuoto di quel nostro silenzio interiore, ci appare priva di senso, priva di scopo; e quella realtà diversa ci appare orrida nella sua crudezza impassibile e misteriosa, poiché tutte le nostre fittizie relazioni consuete di sentimenti e d'immagini si sono scisse e disgregate in essa. Il vuoto interno si allarga, varca i limiti del nostro corpo, diventa vuoto intorno a noi, un vuoto strano, come un arresto del tempo e della vita, come se il nostro silenzio interiore si sprofondasse negli abissi del mistero (SPSV 152-3).

The emptiness here is not Romantic ennui but a 'tabula rasa'. Once the appearances and normal ways of seeing have crumbled, it is impossible to reconstruct them again or to believe in their power. The moment of vision ends but its effect endures. The change of perception is so radical that it has implications which concern lifestyle as well as experience.

Con uno sforzo supremo cerchiamo allora di riacquistare la coscienza normale delle cose, di riallacciare con esse le consuete relazioni, di riconnetter le idee, di risentirci vivi come per l'innanzi, al modo solito. Ma a questa coscienza normale, a queste idee riconnesse, a questo sentimento solito della vita non possiamo piú prestar fede, perché sappiamo ormai che sono un nostro inganno per vivere e che sotto c'è qualcos'altro, a cui l'uomo non può affacciarsi, se non a costo di morire o d'impazzire. È stato un attimo; ma dura a lungo in noi l'impressione di esso, come di vertigine, con la quale contrasta la stabilità pur così vana, delle cose: ambiziose o misere apparenze. La vita, allora, che s'aggira piccola, solita, fra queste apparenze, ci sembra quasi che non sia piú per davvero, che sia come una

fantasmagoria meccanica. E come darle importanza? come portarle rispetto? (SPSV 153).¹³

The glimpse of the alternative reality provokes a crisis of motivation and undermines the conventional world because it is experienced as a revelation of truth. Camus too notes this:

Il existe un fait d'évidence qui semble tout à fait moral, c'est qu'un homme est toujours la proie de ses vérités. Une fois reconnues, il ne saurait s'en détacher. Il faut bien payer un peu. Un homme devenu conscient de l'absurde lui est lié pour jamais (LMS 50).

In Ionesco's work the pattern is more complex as he claims that he constantly swings between "deux états de conscience fondamentaux" (NCN 230) which form the source of much of the structure of his work. The protagonist of his novel Le Solitaire calls them "la nausée du trop plein" and "la nausée du vide" (LS 122). The former state of mind is one of feeling crushed by the material weight of life and overwhelmed by forms. Despite the sense of suffocation there is also a sense of emptiness because forms seem meaningless as well as ubiquitous. In Journal en miettes he calls it "ce vide que nous ressentons habituellement, ce vide de lourdeur" (JM 58).

... le monde pèse; l'univers m'écrase. Un rideau, un mur infranchissable s'interpose entre moi et le monde, entre moi et moi-même, la matière remplit tout, prend toute la place, anéantit toute liberté sous son poids, l'horizon se rétrécit, le monde devient un cachot étouffant. La parole se brise, mais d'une autre façon, les mots retombent, comme des pierres, comme des cadavres; je me sens envahi par des forces pesantes contre lesquelles je mène un combat où je ne puis avoir que le dessous (NCN 232).

He associates this with heaviness, presence, opacity, darkness, mud and water. Whereas here Ionesco feels shut in by matter, in the opposite state the world seems unreal because it is seen from the outside. He associates this with evanescence, transparency, weightlessness and light. The material world loses its contours and solidity and is permeated by unreality.

Chacun de nous a pu sentir, à certains moments, que le monde a une substance de rêve, que les murs n'ont plus d'épaisseur, qu'il nous semble voir à travers tout, dans un univers sans espace, uniquement fait de clartés et de couleurs; toute l'existence, toute l'histoire du monde devient, à ce moment, inutile, insensée,

impossible. Lorsqu'on ne parvient pas à dépasser cette première étape du dépaysement (car on a bien l'impression de se réveiller dans un monde inconnu) la sensation de l'évanescence vous donne une angoisse, une sorte de vertige (NCN 231).

This unknown world is clearly defined in other descriptions of the experience as 'bare existence', the brute presence of the world as it exists outside the familiar human terms. To the term 'absurd' Ionesco prefers "insolite" which properly suggests the loss of the familiar. He specifically links the dissolution of the constructed surfaces of everyday reality with the recovery of childhood perception - a purity of vision and a sense of wonder before the simple but mysterious fact of existence.

Il arrive que le monde semble être vidé de toute expression, de tout contenu. Il arrive qu'on le regarde tout comme si l'on naissait à ce moment-là et alors il nous apparaît étonnant et inexplicable. Certes, nous en connaissons des explications. On nous en a donné beaucoup et nous disposons de toutes sortes de systèmes de pensée. Seulement ces systèmes se dissipent au moment où nous avons ce sentiment, cette intuition, primordiaux, fondamentaux que nous sommes là que quelque chose existe et que ce quelque chose suscite la question. A ce moment-là, tous les systèmes de pensée, toutes les explications paraissent insuffisants; d'autant que ces systèmes expliquent ce qui se passe à partir de quelque chose qui est informulé: cette présence monolithique, inexplicable du monde et de l'existence, que les idéologies, morales, sociologies fuient; elles tournent le dos ou restent devant la porte (ECB 133).

The moment he describes has a clearly Pirandellian resonance. Elsewhere it is not so much that reality breaks down but that forms empty of their contents so that reality appears as just a shell: "les façades du rien" (NCN 224). This perception matches another Pirandellian one, that of human existence as a constructed form over a void, the motif of "maschere nude".

Furthermore, if the rational mind is seen as a tool for categorising the continuum of reality or breaking it up into manageable segments, then when that man-made world-within-the-world dissolves in the Absurd experience, the world is recovered in its primal unity and wholeness. It is typical of the experience that this radical change of perception is intimately linked to an altered sense of self:

Les murs s'effondraient, les définitions se disloquaient. Il n'y avait plus aucune direction. Les noms des choses se séparaient des choses. J'étais immergé dans un océan de lumière bleue, je n'étais plus moi-même qu'un vague contour lumineux. Plus de forme, plus d'ombres, plus de couleurs, notre réalité se brisait en des milliers de morceaux, s'en allait en fumée, puis la fumée aussi se dissipait et il n'y avait plus que ce soleil immense qui allait d'un horizon à l'autre.

Tout ce que j'avais cru être des constructions solides n'était plus que des châteaux de cartes qui s'étaient effondrés. La pierre n'était plus que de l'eau et de la brume. Le monde sortait, un, d'une multiplicité de tiroirs. Car, tout, jusque-là, n'avait été qu'une série disloquée de boîtes et de contenus de boîtes (PPPP 252-3, my underlining).

Here, as in that other classic of Absurdity, Sartre's La Nausée, the vertiginous disintegration is explained in terms of the failure of words to account for what the protagonists see and feel. Something normally taken for granted – the unity of word and world – falls apart, so that what appears is the word on one hand and the massive, undifferentiated mass of reality on the other. The protagonist of Ionesco's Le Solitaire looks at an object before him, and describes its dimensions and features: it is a cupboard. Yet at that 'absurd' moment he sees that it could be anything once its purpose within the frameworks of human needs is obliterated. "Les mots me paraissaient faux. Les objets avaient perdu, me semblait-il, leur fonction" (LS 120).

Sartre's Roquentin, faced with the tram seat and the tree root, is struck by the impenetrable 'thereness' of the world. He can shower the root of the tree with any words he likes but the root will not change or move or be any more within his grasp. This failure results in a vision of human smallness. "Les mots s'étaient évanouis et, avec eux, la signification des choses, leurs modes d'emploi, les faibles repères que les hommes ont tracé à leur surface" (LN 179). Furthermore, the human discovery of the biological function of roots has no power to explain its mere existence. "La fonction n'expliquait rien" (LN 182).

As in Ionesco's descriptions of these experiences, Roquentin wavers

between light-headedness at the emptiness and fragility of the human world and a nightmarish sense of oppression by a material world bereft of human relevance. Sometimes the two perceptions fuse resulting in 'ambivalent' images of viscosity, humidity, sickly-sweetness, mucus and other bodily secretions, all expressing Roquentin's perception of being caught between two orders of reality. The experience of 'le solitaire' is also ambiguous. "C'est curieux comme tout est à la fois si présent et si absent, si dur, si épais et si fragile" (LS 122). The vocabulary of fragmentation, dissolution and separation recurs in Roquentin's description as do the notions of laying bare existence and a return of the latter to a state of unity: "la diversité des choses, leur individualité n'était qu'une apparence, un vernis. Ce vernis avait fondu, il restait des masses monstrueuses et molles, en désordre - nues, d'une effrayante et obscène nudité" (LN 179-180). Not only do the surfaces of reality disintegrate, but Roquentin finds that he can no longer 'tame' matter with words. The self-sufficiency of language as something imposed by humans on matter is distressingly apparent to him. "Je murmure: c'est une banquette, un peu comme un exorcisme. Mais le mot reste sur mes lèvres: il refuse d'aller se poser sur la chose. Elle reste ce qu'elle est,..." (LN 176). Without words to distance and order reality for him, Roquentin finds himself overwhelmed and intimidated by the presence of objects in their irreducible materiality.

Les choses se sont délivrées de leurs noms. Elles sont là, grotesques, têtues, géantes et ça paraît imbécile de les appeler des banquettes ou de dire quoi que ce soit sur elles: je suis au milieu des Choses, les innommables. Seul, sans mots, sans défenses, elles m'environnent, sous moi, derrière moi, au-dessus de moi. Elles n'exigent rien, elles ne s'imposent pas: elles sont là (LN 177).

It is a virtue in Sartre's novel that this very Pirandellian incompatibility of Form and existence is evoked in a poetic language in which the proliferation of qualifying phrases and similes is the very product of the splitting of the sign from its referent. In the absence of a one-to-one

relationship between world and word, any given object can only be designated by evocation and comparisons.

The experience of the Absurd encompasses two principles: disintegration and revelation. Roquentin experiences no apocalyptic vision, but "tout d'un coup, d'un seul coup, le voile se déchire, j'ai compris, j'ai VU" (LN 178). The modern revelation is not a discovery of transcendental truth but a re-discovery of this world which has been lost under the weight of human mental clutter. It is a return to purely earthly origins. Roquentin significantly calls the Absurd "l'expérience de l'Absolu" (LN 182), an absolute consisting simply of bare existence. "L'existence s'était soudain dévoilée" (LN 179). The Absurd is here defined as the direct encounter between consciousness and the non-human world, between a warm, sentient hand and a cold, hard stone, and in the realisation that "Exister, c'est être là, simplement" (LN 184). Faced with the impotence of human constructions and also by the meaninglessness of existence without them, Absurd man is also denied the consolations of religion. In its pure form the Absurd experience is the discovery of the absence of transcendence. As defined by Camus, the Absurd condition is to live with the sense of a Fall and yet not to know of Paradise, "le péché sans Dieu" (LMS 60); a sense of exile unaccompanied by knowledge of a homeland. The Absurd results in a stalemate or limbo, summed up by Ionesco as being "Écartelé entre l'horreur de vivre et l'horreur de mourir" (PPPP 121).

III(ii) The Causes of the Absurd Experience

Camus indicates a number of possible causes of the disintegration of the habitual frameworks of perception, some of which are archetypal situations in which a person is obliged to view the world through different mental parameters. The shift is, however, random and universal. "Le sentiment de l'absurdité au détour de n'importe quelle rue peut frapper à la face de n'importe quel homme" (LMS 24-5).

"Entraîné par la succession du temps, je m'égare d'apparence en apparence".¹⁴ The Absurdist sees human beings deriving their sense of purpose and meaning from the flow of time and repeated chains of daily acts. A recognition of 'reality' as "apparences" may be induced by a momentary distancing from the routines. Camus refers to "ce singulier état d'âme où le vide devient éloquent, où la chaîne des gestes est rompue, où le coeur cherche en vain le maillon qui la renoue..." (LMS 26-7). In Pirandello's work a frequent trigger of a change of perception is a journey. In his novella "Notte", the protagonist, Noli, is obliged to break a journey and spend five hours at a small station in the middle of the night. The isolation, immobility and unfamiliar situation are conducive to reflection. In the station cafe Noli is greeted by the following sight:

Ma erano dipinti sui visi gonfii, pallidi, sudici e sbattuti dei viaggiatori una tetra ambascia, un fastidio opprimente, un'agra nausea della vita che, lontana dai consueti affetti, fuor della traccia delle abitudini, si scopriva a tutti vacua, stolta, incresciosa (NA I 522).

Camus however explains that the very monotony and emptiness of a routine existence can cause the perspective to shift, as oppression will stir the spirit to question what suffocates it.

Il arrive que les décors s'écroulent. Lever, tramway, quatre heures de bureau ou d'usine, repas, sommeil et lundi mardi mercredi jeudi vendredi et samedi sur le même rythme, cette route se suit aisément la plupart du temps. Un jour seulement, le 'pourquoi' s'élève et tout commence dans cette lassitude teintée

d'étonnement. "Commence", ceci est important. La lassitude est à la fin des actes d'une vie machinale, mais elle inaugure en même temps le mouvement de la conscience. Elle l'éveille et elle provoque la suite (LMS 27).

In Pirandello's novelle, two situations which pre-dispose characters to sudden rebellion are chronic illness ("Fuga") or severely deprived living conditions ("Il treno ha fischiato"), while two 'classic' conditions which take a person out of habitual perception are awareness of the flowing on of time towards death or a brush with death itself. This latter category is Ionesco's perennial standpoint before human existence.

An encounter with the non-human, for example, when viewing a landscape or as in Roquentin's case (to which Camus refers), touching a stone, will precipitate a recognition of the artifice of forms and the ineffability of reality. It may also come about through people:

Les hommes aussi secrètent de l'inhumain. Dans certaines heures de lucidité, l'aspect mécanique de leurs gestes, leur pantomime privée de sens rend stupide tout ce qui les entoure. Un homme parle au téléphone derrière une cloison vitrée; on ne l'entend pas, mais on voit sa mimique sans portée: on se demande pourquoi il vit (LMS 29).

This is precisely the procedure behind the dramatic forms of both La Cantatrice chauve in which the Smiths and Martins behave mechanically, and Les Chaises, where the old people talk and gesture to invisible guests. The resulting sense of futility can inspire laughter as well as nausea. In its structure this situation is related to Bergson's formula of the comic as "Du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant", but rather than being the laughter of confident superiority, Absurd laughter is tinged with despair because the viewer recognises himself in the mechanical behaviour of others. The Pirandellian mirror moment, then, is also absurd in nature. Before a mirror humans experience themselves from a new standpoint: from outside. They see themselves as just "apparence" and realise to what an extent their inner world fails to find expression in their physical form. Laudisi, in Così è (se vi pare) explains the dilemma, addressing his own reflection in

a mirror:

Il guaio è che, come ti vedo io, non ti vedono gli altri! E allora, caro mio, che diventi tu? Dico per me che, qua di fronte a te, mi vedo e mi tocco - tu - per come ti vedono gli altri - che diventi? - Un fantasma, caro, un fantasma! (MN 1 1043-4).

IV(1) The Absurd as Liberation: Ionesco

In addition to sharing the 'classic' Absurd experiences as found in Le Mythe de Sisyphe and La Nausée, the work of Pirandello and Ionesco encompasses a range of experiences which begin with the Absurd or which share certain of its features and then develop into a different kind of consciousness or experience, whose common denominator is the loss of the anthropomorphic perspective. Their relationship with the Absurd can be seen most clearly in Ionesco's accounts.

Already in Ionesco's descriptions of "l'insolite" an element of ambiguity is present which makes it more than loss and revelation. The world, as we have already seen, is perceived as liberated. Ionesco's reaction is frequently not just vertigo or terror but stupor, wonder and astonishment. Although the human world is belittled as it is thrown against the backcloth of eternity and the rest of the universe, Ionesco emphasises that this entails also a deep awareness of the sheer miracle of the mystery of life:

... lorsque, par exemple, je me réveille, à moi-même et au monde et que je prends ou que je reprends conscience soudainement, que je suis, que j'existe, qu'il y a quelque chose qui m'entoure, des sortes de choses, une sorte de monde et que tout m'apparaît insolite, incompréhensible, et que m'envahit l'étonnement d'être. Je plonge dans cet étonnement. L'univers me paraît alors infiniment étrange, étrange et étranger. A ce moment, je le contemple, avec un mélange d'angoisse et d'euphorie; à l'écart de l'univers, comme placé à une certaine distance, hors de lui;... (NCN 196).

The terms here are positive - euphoria, awakening, and the sense of self is fortified rather than undermined. The experience may develop even further and as surprise becomes joy Ionesco's prose assumes the cadences of ecstasy.

Mais tout cela peut, tout aussi bien, devenir euphorique: l'angoisse se transforme soudain en liberté; plus rien n'a d'importance en dehors de l'émerveillement d'être, de la nouvelle surprenante conscience de notre existence dans une lumière d'aurore, dans la liberté retrouvée;... (NCN 231).

The Absurd here entails not loss but liberation from a false and constrict-

ing reality. Camus too notes that the Absurd is double and that the momentary distancing from the structures of life can be salutary: "S'abîmer dans cette certitude sans fond, se sentir désormais assez étranger à sa propre vie pour l'accroître et la parcourir sans la myopie de l'amant, il y a là le principe d'une libération" (LMS 83).

The liberation is dual: for Ionesco the sense of self is renewed at the same time as the vision of the external world, which is delivered from the frameworks imposed by reason and the practical exigencies of social organisation. In the light of the wonder of 'being' the discovery of the emptiness of form is now experienced with relief.

... c'est comme si les choses s'étaient libérées de toute dénomination arbitraire, d'un cadre qui ne leur convenaient pas, qui les limitaient; la contrainte ou l'obligation sociale et logique de la définition, de l'organisation se dissipait (PPPP 225).¹⁵

Elsewhere perceptions of the break-up of habitual reality are seen not as "l'insolite" but are referred to as "moments of light or grace", and are not necessarily preceded by a terrifying encounter with chaos. The perceiver is invaded by joy, light, certainty and plenitude, an experience which goes far beyond the Absurd revelation of 'bare' existence or the perception of existence outside the habitual human frameworks. Light is seen to burst through conventional meanings and definitions: "... je m'éveillais à une lumière qui disloquait les anciennes significations des choses,..." (PPPP 227).

In such passages the sense of separation and solitude which is one of the hallmarks of the Absurd is entirely overcome. Ionesco describes himself as returning to a lost, essential reality, leaving behind the "pur néant" of politics, systems and language: "... je pense que je réintérais l'unique et essentielle réalité" (PPPP 225). In one of his accounts of the experience he goes so far as to talk of a presence and a sense of being guided: "... et, tout d'un coup, j'ai ressenti une présence, et j'ai

senti, ou j'ai cru sentir à ce moment-là que Quelqu'un me tenait dans sa main, que nous n'étions pas perdus" (HQ 22).¹⁶

Whereas the Absurd entails disintegration and ontological insecurity, this distancing from human reality is shown by Ionesco as giving a sense of reunion with another reality beyond it, and as bringing a sense of wholeness and ontological certainty. It constitutes a return to the centre. "Je me trouvais tout d'un coup au centre de l'existence pure, ineffable" (PPPP 225). "Je me sentais en harmonie avec tout" (PPPP 238). What begins as a profoundly annihilating event for the self becomes an affirmation of a deeper self which exists independently of the ephemeral constructed forms of existence. To explain this Ionesco makes a distinction between existing and 'being'.

... je comprends que je suis un être, un homme, dans le centre du monde et je vois le ciel et je prends conscience que j'existe. Ou plutôt je prends conscience que je suis. C'est d'être qui me comble de joie et qui me stupéfie, être m'étonne beaucoup plus qu'exister. Je suis plus fort que le néant (PPPP 245).

Perhaps of greater import to the death-haunted Ionesco is the fact that at such times he feels eternal and loses his fear of death: "A ce moment-là je me suis dit: 'je n'ai plus peur de la mort'. J'avais le sentiment d'une vérité absolue, définitive" (ECB 33).

In La Nausée Roquentin finds himself caught up in a paradox which can be seen to be typically Absurd: while he discovers the facticity of human constructions, in order to express the experience he is obliged to use words ... which have already been seen to be empty. So when he finally hits upon the word "Absurdity" to refer to his experience he is acutely aware that he is no closer to expressing it: "Absurdité: encore un mot; je me débats contre les mots" (LN 182). Similarly Ionesco, when describing his moments of plenitude, feels the need to apologise for his language and stress the inadequacy of words: "Je dis ça avec des mots qui ne peuvent que défigurer, qui ne peuvent pas rendre compte de la lumière de cette

intuition profonde, totale, organique ..." (PPPP 226).¹⁷ The thing is, by definition, beyond definition so that ultimately he can only describe it in terms of its effect on him, "certitude d'être".

As a result of the ineffability of the experience, his descriptions are full of paradox, though it may also be possible to account for this with the consideration that a straddling of two modes of consciousness is involved. Although the world loses its familiarity Ionesco does not feel lost or threatened. Astonishment at "l'insolite" mingles with a sense of recognition.

Le monde était neuf et familier, surprenant, connu, reconnu, retrouvé. Comment dire, un monde libéré de cette signification, comment dire, une sorte de respiration vivante dont je faisais partie (PPPP 253).

The sense of belonging to another order of being which is suggested here is far removed from Roquentin's revulsion at a cold, dirty stone on the beach of Bouville. Although Ionesco says that he feels timeless when filled with such joy, the experience itself lasts for a few seconds. "Cela dura un très long temps. Cela dura quelques secondes" (PPPP 233). Furthermore, while on the one hand he is outside himself and sees himself, he is nevertheless at one with himself and his senses blaze. He is simultaneously inside and outside experiencing two perspectives.¹⁸

Now that the disintegration of constructed reality has resulted in a revelation of such intensity, normal perception is viewed as a kind of sleep:

Je me réveillais, tout d'un coup, de quel sommeil, je m'éveillais à une lumière qui disloquait les anciennes significations des choses, du temps où ma conscience était endormie.... Abandonnant, ou me réveillant d'un sommeil peuplé par les fantômes de l'existence quotidienne, j'entrais tout d'un coup dans le coeur d'une réalité si évidente, si totale, si éclairante, si lumineuse, que je me demandais comment je ne m'étais pas aperçu jusque-là que cette réalité était si facile à trouver et qu'il était si facile de s'y trouver (PPPP 227).

The terms are now entirely reversed: the human world ceases to be real.

Camus suggests that the Absurd revelation similarly implies that to live in the human world entails a narrowing of consciousness, a shutting out of certain aspects of reality: "Quel est donc cet incalculable sentiment qui prive l'esprit du sommeil nécessaire à sa vie?" (LMS 18) is his first definition of the Absurd. The idea is quintessentially Pirandellian in its recognition that living requires masks.

The close relationship which I have suggested exists between the Absurd and the joyful reunion with an essential reality is quite explicit in Ionesco's accounts:

Ainsi donc, si la première étape de cet état de conscience avait débuté par un vide du contenu des notions, la deuxième, l'essentielle, était une plénitude unifiée au-delà des définitions et des limites (PPPP 227).

While this transformation is not discussed by Pirandello in a theoretical manner, many of his novelle contain accounts of similar experiences which all point to the inherent ambiguity of the Absurd.

IV(ii) Beyond the Absurd in Pirandello

So far we have seen examples where the Absurd precedes the moment of plenitude. In the novella "La carriola" the Absurd awareness of the emptiness of form is the product of a moment of revelation of the essential, and the outcome of this awareness provides the story's climax. The opening details are designed to titillate the reader's imagination and curiosity: a respectable man prominent in public life regularly abuses a dumb victim "nel massimo segreto, con spaventosa gioja, perché vi assaporo, tremando, la voluttà d'una divina, consciente follia, che per un attimo mi libera e mi vendica di tutto" (NA II 714). The bathos which results when the reader discovers that this demonic language refers to the wheelbarrowing of the family dog by its back legs is actually a brand of "umorismo", because the gravity of the existential observations which precede the revelation adds another level of meaning to the comic one. The clash of perspectives (existential crisis/back legs of dog) is both the key to the narrator's strategy for survival and to his mode of narration.

Although the admission of the secret act forms the climax to the story, I would suggest that the real focus is the existential vision which is narrated by the lawyer in order to explain his bizarre habit. The bulk of the account concerns the crisis of awareness which follows a moment of revelation and includes a short 'theoretical exposition' in which the narrator discusses what he has deduced about identity from his experience. The moment of revelation is similar in function to the Premessa in Il fu Mattia Pascal. "Il valore dell'atto ch'io compio può essere stimato e apprezzato solamente da quei pochissimi a cui la vita si sia rivelata come d'un tratto s'è rivelata a me" (NA II 714-5).

This revelation of life occurs, typically, during a train journey. The narrator is out of his habitual setting. As he reads on the train his mind drifts away from his book and though his eyes look at the countryside,

he does not consciously observe it. What this meticulous description succeeds in conveying is precisely the moment in which, in Camus' words, the void becomes eloquent and the 'décors' of life disappear. What the narrator perceives is not nothingness but the possibility of a new mode of consciousness, another, potential life which would bring fulfilment and wholeness. Whereas Ionesco is overwhelmed by this vision, the narrator in "La carriola" merely glimpses it as another dimension:

Lo spirito mi s'era quasi alienato dai sensi, in una lontananza infinita, ove avvertiva appena, chi sa come, con una delizia che non gli pareva sua, il brulichio d'una vita diversa, non sua, ma che avrebbe potuto esser sua, non qua, non ora, ma là, in quell' infinita lontananza; d'una vita remota, che forse era stata sua, non sapeva come né quando; di cui gli alitava il ricordo indistinto non d'atti, non d'aspetti, quasi di desideri prima svaniti che sorti; con una pena di non essere, angosciata, vana e pur dura, quella stessa dei fiori, forse, che non han potuto sbocciare; il brulichio, insomma, di una vita che era da vivere, là lontano lontano, donde accenava con palpiti e guizzi di luce; e non era nata; nella quale esso, lo spirito, allora sí, ah, tutto intero e pieno si sarebbe ritrovato; anche per soffrire, non per godere soltanto, ma di sofferenze veramente sue (NA II 715-16).

The account shares the motifs of light, distance and the suspension of normal time with Ionesco's moments of revelation. The lawyer then falls asleep and on waking both his identity and the appearance of the world have altered; his perception has radically changed. His state of mind now corresponds to the Absurd and especially to Ionesco's state of "lourdeur":

... quando mi destai, tutto indolenzito e con la bocca amara, acre e arida, già prossimo all'arrivo, mi ritrovai d'un tratto in tutt' altro animo, con un senso d'atroce afa della vita, in un tetro, plumbeo attonimento, nel quale gli aspetti delle cose più consuete m'apparvero vòtati d'ogni senso, eppure, per i miei occhi, d'una gravezza crudele, insopportabile (NA II 716).

This Absurd consciousness is consolidated when he arrives at his front door and, like Camus' Absurd man before a mirror, comes face to face with his brass nameplate with all his degrees and titles and "vidi a un tratto, come da fuori, me stesso e la mia vita, ma per non riconoscermi e per non riconoscerla come mia" (NA II 716). This is the moment of fracture when the self separates from the 'persona' and a gap opens up between inner and

outer worlds. He is no longer at one with his life and furthermore he realises that what he thought was his life was the product of other people. But his perception of alienation is deeper than this, for having glimpsed a potential life of wholeness and authenticity, he sees that life as he has lived it so far is not life at all.

Conobbi d'un tratto d'essere stato sempre come assente da quella casa, dalla vita di quell'uomo, non solo, ma veramente e propriamente da ogni vita. Io non avevo mai vissuto; non ero mai stato nella vita; in una vita, intendo, che potessi riconoscer mia, da me voluta e sentita come mia (NA II 716).

There follows a development of this idea. The life that human beings struggle to build for themselves is seen as death itself: "... non si conoscono per morti e credono d'esser vivi" (NA II 718). This reversal by which a 'normal' human life of work, family and habits comes to be viewed as death will recur in connection with these moments of revelation in Pirandello's work. Now that the narrator has seen his deathly condition he burns to rid himself of it and to seek authenticity. The awakening parallels that of Enrico IV. Both men are haunted by a sense of exile and neither can escape. Although the lawyer of "La carriola" disowns his life, he realises that, for all its artificiality, it is part of a web of relationships with other lives. Furthermore, he finds himself in a situation similar to that of the Absurd writer who is obliged to undermine words with more words. He sees that even if he were to start his life anew he would soon end up in the same situation because as soon as he committed an act it would imprison him and take on meanings and consequences beyond his control. All the narrator can do is flirt with the alternative possibilities locked in his being and commune briefly with the irrational by performing a gratuitous act which is completely out of keeping with his status as a respected lawyer, professor and father.

In "La mano del malato povero" the moment of revelation is again part of a "Premessa", indeed explicitly so. This "Premessa" more closely

resembles that in Il fu Mattia Pascal in that it exists to justify a type of narrative by explaining a way of seeing. The narrator tells the readers that they will not find "notizie di fatto" in his story. The 'who, why and what' will be absent. There will only be the results of his own observations. The "Premessa" concerns the mode of perception which produces these observations and this is in turn the product of a moment of revelation and of the man's way of life thereafter. He lives outside the normal routines of life, "Non ho casa. Non ho nessuno" (NA II 463), and he has no money. He distinguishes himself from the rest of humankind in his indifference to second-hand information. His perception is entirely subjective and his own. He sees this as a way of entering into a direct relationship with the world, of experiencing it in its original purity and plenitude:

... non ho mai capito che gusto ci sia a rivolgere domande agli altri per sapere le cose come sono. Ve le dicono come loro le sanno, come pajono a loro. Voi ve ne contentate? Grazie tante! Io voglio saperle per me, e voglio che entrino in me come a me pajono" (NA II 462).

He paints a very Ionescan view of civilisation as resting on one view of reality which is made up of opinions rigidified and exalted to the status of absolute truth. Far from finding this continuity comforting, he finds it oppressive:

... tutte le cose ci stanno sopra, sotto, intorno, col modo d'essere, il senso, il valore che da secoli e secoli gli uomini hanno dato ad esse.... Ci opprimono per forza col fastidio infinito di questa immutabile realtà convenuta e convenzionale, da tutti subito passivamente. Le fracasserei" (NA II 462).

This urge to break out has its origin in his awareness of other realities existing beyond the conventional one, an awareness brought about when, as for the lawyer of "La carriola", life reveals itself. The language here resembles more clearly that of Ionesco - in addition to the light imagery there is the motif of 'new' vision, the notion too of the "insolito". Once again this is existence stripped of its conventional meanings and of the values imposed on it rather than a transcendent vision.

Eppure è raro che almeno una volta, in un momento felice, non sia avvenuto a ciascuno di vedere all'improvviso il mondo, la vita, con occhi nuovi; d'intravedere in una súbita luce un senso nuovo delle cose; d'intuire in un lampo che relazioni insolite, nuove, impensate, si possono forse stabilire con esse, sicché la vita acquisti agli occhi nostri rinfrescati un valore meraviglioso, diverso, mutevole. Ahimè, si ricasca subito nell'uniformità degli aspetti consueti, nell'abitudine delle consuete relazioni; si riaccetta il consueto valore dell'esistenza quotidiana; ... (NA II 462-3).

The beggar cannot understand why so few people follow up this experience and try to "rompere la crosta di questa comune rappresentazione delle cose" (NA II 462). He himself tries to perpetuate this vision but this has earned him the name of madman. Madness here is not mental illness but involves a recognition that normal perceptual frameworks are not absolutes. In Pirandello's mythology madness means the embracing of the untamed realities lying outside those habitual frameworks, a reality which here, as in "La carriola" is perceived to be authentic. "E io passo per pazzo perché voglio vivere là, in quello che per voi è stato un momento, uno sbarbaglio, un fresco breve stupore di sogno vivo, luminoso; ..." (NA II 463). But the story also suggests why the whole of humanity does not burst the bounds of habit and convention: the beggar pays dearly for his luminous perception not with money but with his health. He puts his mental health before his bodily health, seeing in it the way to a full life. "Mi si è guastato il cuore; mi si sono logorati i polmoni: che me n'importa? Sarò pazzo, ma io vivo" (NA II 463).

He concludes his "Premessa" with an example of his 'new' perception which also hints at another reason for his rejection of civic life. He gives the reader a virtuoso description of the supine patient's view of a doctor or nurse when they are examining him, evoking how bizarre the nostrils and mouth are from below. "Anche senza sentire quello che la bocca vi dice, v'assicuro che si perde il rispetto dell'umanità" (NA II 463). The human is seen as mechanical and dehumanised, recalling Camus.

Here a human being is seen purely as flesh. In many ways this perception is more authentically absurd than the story of the poor man's hand which follows, though as the title suggests, there is a typically absurdist alienation in the way the hand is considered in detachment from the rest of the body. Despite the beggar's rejection of "le notizie di fatto" the story is still a piece of detective and deductive reasoning based on the movements of one hand. Supremely Absurd is the narrator's declaration of ignorance, his refusal to claim privileged access to truth. The story is built out of sporadic observations, some openly made through the flawed, oneiric vision of a drowsy and sick person. The muslin veils which separate the hospital beds are explicitly emblematic of the limitations of all human perception. The story is contextless, plotless and has no central character. It is suspended in the mind of the narrator and intricately linked with his vicissitudes. Its Absurdity lies in its awareness of its own flawed structure, of its lacunae and of its origin in a fallible consciousness.

The ambiguity of the Absurd experience arises out of the double nature of constructed reality which is both protective and restrictive. In the Pirandellian universe forms give an illusion of unity by masking the threat of the irrational, but ultimately conventions and traditions turn these forms into instruments of oppression. This doubleness accounts for a tension found in both Pirandello and Ionesco between people who shun the 'other' reality and those who seek to uncover it. Evelina Morli of La Signora Morli, una e due talks of "... l'orrore di vedere in me un'altra" (MN II 263), while Donata Genzi of Trovarsi seeks to "Evadere! Trasfigurarsi! diventare altri!" (MN II 913). Some characters desire stability and order while others are haunted by a sense of imprisonment. In "La trappola", the narrator mocks his readers' night fears of seeing the illusory nature of their world revealed.

Come la mano, trema tutta la vostra realtà. Vi si scopre fittizia e inconsistente. Artificiale come quella luce di candela. E tutti i vostri sensi vigilano tesi con ispasimo, nella paura che sotto a questa realtà, di cui scoprite la vana inconsistenza, un'altra realtà non vi si riveli, oscura, orribile: la vera (NA I 680).

The narrator loathes form, perceiving both constructed reality and natural physical existence as a trap: "Sai che ho provato sempre ribrezzo, orrore, di darmi comunque una forma, di rappresentarmi, di fissarmi anche momentaneamente in essa" (NA I 681). He believes that authentic life is not in any kind of form, but in all that flows and changes beyond it. "La vita è il vento, la vita è il mare, la vita è il fuoco: non la terra che si incrosta e assume forma. Ogni forma è la morte" (NA I 682). In the light of this he suffers from a thirst for difference and multiplicity, a "bisogno smanioso di presentarmi a me stesso nello specchio con un aspetto diverso, di illudermi di non esser sempre quell'uno, di vedermi un altro!" (NA I 681). One way in which he desires to escape form is to throw off consciousness and become an object. "Sono come le seggiole di questa stanza, come il tavolino, le tende, l'armadio, il divano, che non hanno bisogno di lume e non sanno e non vedono che io sono qua. Io voglio essere come loro, e non vedermi e dimenticare di esser qua" (NA I 685).

"La trappola" focuses on the negative side of the yearning for difference, on a kind of death impulse. The narrator is inspired not by the visionary glimpse of authenticity but by revulsion, a horror of flesh and an awareness of mortality. The illusions which make up our reality are endowed with "le vostre stesse occhiaie enfiate e acquose, e la giallezza della vostra insonnia, e anche i vostri dolori artritici. Sì, il rodio sordo dei tofi alle giunture delle dita" (NA I 680). As the lawyer's house in "La carriola" is seen to embody his constructed identity, here the clothes hanging in the wardrobe suggest a whole vision of the universe: "... i vostri abiti, vuote spoglie appese, che hanno preso il grinzio, le

pieghe dei vostri ginocchi stanchi, dei vostri gomiti aguzzi" (NA I 680-1). The reader has to wait until the end of the story to see the occasion for this nihilistic vision and lugubrious style: the appearance of the vegetable 'shell' that is the narrator's senile father dying slowly. Human life is shown to be a protracted process of dying; to be born is to be 'fixed' for death. The reversal implicit in the Absurdist world that this life is a death becomes explicit here. Humans are "morti", "tanti piccoli e miseri stagni in attesa di putrefazione" (NA I 682).

Whilst never as extreme as this, Ionesco's writing similarly degrades habitual reality and expresses a sense of exile using the same images of artificial light as Pirandello. After his moments of vision "Je rentrais dans la nuit ou dans la pénombre, je me heurtais aux objets, aux murs. J'étais là en train d'allumer péniblement la bougie de la compréhension quotidienne dont la lumière n'est que pénombre. Le cauchemar de ce monde sans cesse recommençait" (PPPP 254).

IV(iii) The Ambiguity of the Absurd in Adamov's "L'Aveu"

The ambiguity of the Absurd experience is not confined to the work of Pirandello and Ionesco. Adamov's L'Aveu manifests some of the double features just discussed too. Like Ionesco's journals it is pervaded by a sense of exile and separation. "Je dis que l'homme est un écartelé. Et pas seulement un écartelé, un crucifié."¹⁹ The ubiquitous alienation is reinforced by passages expressing the 'oddness' of the body and of physical form and, as in La Nausée, scenes which take place in public settings (such as a crowded bar) in which parts of the body are disturbingly seen to be detached pieces of flesh.

Like much of Ionesco's personal writing, L'Aveu shows Adamov scrutinising his identity, the relationship between Self and the world and the mechanisms of perception. He possesses a 'post-Copernican' awareness of the smallness of humanity against the background of the cosmos and experiences feelings of powerlessness typical of the Absurd. "Je suis agi", he says, and pictures himself as a tiny part of "un grand être incompréhensible" through which runs the force of "... de vastes lois cosmiques que je n'entrevois même pas, mais qui suffisent à me faire sauter comme une marionnette sans savoir pourquoi."²⁰ Adamov's experience of the world swings – rather as Ionesco's does – between the two extremes of wonder and oppression. He consequently shares the Ionescan vocabulary of heaviness and suffocation.

Parfois, cette grande vie totale me semble si dramatiquement belle qu'elle me plonge dans le ravissement. Mais plus souvent elle m'apparaît comme une bête monstrueuse qui me pénètre et me déborde, et qui est partout, en moi et hors de moi.²¹

Like Ionesco he is haunted by the knowledge that language loses touch with reality and that human perception sees not the world but the framework which the mind employs for ordering the world.

De sa naissance à sa mort, au long des jours, l'homme ne voit presque rien.... il classe immédiatement ce qu'il voit dans des

catégories toutes faites comme pour s'excuser de voir si mal et s'en débarrasser. Il dit: ceci est une chaise, ceci est un chien. Ainsi, il se dispense de voir.²²

Consequently Adamov depicts humanity as thirsting to unite with reality, to "passer outre aux frontières personnelles, crever l'opacité de sa peau qui le sépare du monde.... Derrière tout ce qu'il a coutume de voir, l'homme cherche autre chose. Toujours il est altéré."²³ To break down the habitual and expand perception is an urgent necessity for Adamov, not something to be avoided for the sake of preserving an illusion of security.

Il est temps; je dois m'éveiller. M'éveiller, ouvrir les yeux, ouvrir mon coeur, ouvrir ma tête, m'ouvrir à tout ce qu'est extérieur, jusqu'à l'instant où intérieur et extérieur ne feront plus qu'un.²⁴

The habitual forms of the mind must therefore be fought because they stand between him and reality. As in Ionesco's work, the everyday is degraded to the status of sleep. "Il faut se tenir en éveil, lutter sans cesse contre la torpeur des états de conscience habituels...."²⁵ The desire for purity, wholeness and unity is constantly reiterated in this work and when it is achieved it is experienced as a vision which is evoked in images of light and sky and described as a lifting of a veil: "... il attend ce regard unique qui dissipe les brumes sordides de l'habitude et rend à tout objet visible sa pureté essentielle."²⁶ "Ô vie, chemins couverts de brume! Et soudain, miraculeusement, la brume se résorbe et s'efface dévorée par la lumière glorieuse d'un ciel immuablement bleu. C'est la révélation, l'arrachement du voile."²⁷ It is interesting that as in Ionesco's accounts what is clearly a change of consciousness is experienced as a happening in the exterior world. For both there is not only a reunion with the world but also a contact with the self which results in stupefaction. "Quand l'esprit veut se confronter avec lui-même ou le monde, il ne peut connaître que par un éclair d'illumination qui le laisse pantelant d'évidence et de stupeur. La stupeur et l'évidence infailliblement sont engendrées par

toute immédiate vision."²⁸

Explicit in Adamov's account also is the necessity of fragmentation before reality is uncovered. "L'homme ne peut atteindre au centre immobile de lui-même que s'il prend conscience dans tout son être du déchirement."²⁹ When the mind is briefly distanced from its habitual frameworks and becomes aware of the "... ombres illusoires de la durée" a dramatic bursting of horizons occurs in which "l'esprit vit incommensurablement plus haut et plus loin qu'il ne fait de coutume au long des jours."³⁰

V The Absurd and Mysticism

Ionesco explicitly links his experiences of plenitude with "les images lumineuses des mystiques" and sees them as the logical outcome of the Absurd vision of fragmentation and emptiness (PPPP 229).

The term 'mysticism' has suffered both an erosion of meaning and at the same time gained some connotations in the lay mind which have contributed further to its innate potential for raising suspicions and scepticism. It is popularly associated with spiritualism, clairvoyance, hypnotism, occultism and hallucinations. It is sometimes a blanket term for irrationalism or flabby thinking. Whilst these aspects of its reputation are largely unfounded, others are simply a corruption of the truth, for example its preoccupation with the divine and unseen have given the word 'mystic' connotations of ascetic impracticality and world rejection. Such associations should however be considered alongside the fact that the writings of some of the most influential scholars, poets and philosophers of both ancient and modern times manifest mystical tendencies or have been influenced by mystical thinkers – writers such as Plato, Aquinas, Bruno, Dante, Spinoza, Goethe, Hegel, Blake, Carlyle, Schelling, Schlegel and Unamuno, to name but a few. Whilst it may be possible to dismiss mystical experience as hallucination or the product of mental illness (as it is possible to write off St. Paul's vision on the road to Damascus as an epileptic fit) and to question its credibility as a fact of life, it is not possible to dismiss its importance as a fact of literature, a recurring motif present in the texts of Eastern and Western culture. As such it is under scrutiny in the present study.

The phenomenon of mysticism may be said to comprise three distinct areas: the mystical experience itself, the methods which lead to the experience (contemplative paths) and the beliefs or doctrines which emerge

or are deduced from the experience. I am not here concerned with contemplative paths, although they will be relevant in later chapters. Accounts of mystical experiences can be found in all eras, all parts of the world and in all religions. Unity emerges as the key concept, whether as a vision of the unity of all things or as a sense of union with an absolute reality (the All, the One, God) beyond normal human perception and beyond the material world. Whilst descriptions of the experience concur on its basic features, differences arise in the matter of its interpretation.³¹ Indeed one of the problems addressed by modern commentators is that of judging how far the subject's cultural conditioning and "conceptual equipment" influences his interpretation of the experience.³² A recurrent source of difference in accounts is the exact nature of the reality which is felt to be contacted. Although it varies in degrees of transcendence or immanence, and in its relationship to the subject's self, it is generally felt to be divine, Absolute or 'objective'.

There exists an embarrassment of typologies of mystical experiences, none of which, according to Wainwright, is adequate.³³ We will briefly mention some classifications which will be of use in identifying the nature and origin of the mystical elements in the writing of Pirandello and Ionesco.

The mysticism of love and union, as expounded in the writing of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the Islamic Sufis and the Bhagavad Gita, emphasises escape from the solitude of selfhood towards union with God or Nature. In the mysticism of Knowledge and Understanding expressed in the Upanishads and in the writings of Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, it is the human desire to comprehend the Oneness behind the diversity of phenomena, and to grasp the ultimate reality of the universe which is satisfied.³⁴

Perhaps one of the most basic and useful distinctions is that between Introvertive and Extrovertive mysticism made by Walter Stace.³⁵ The former

involves the turning of perception inwards, away from sensation and the empirical experience of the material world towards a direct apprehension of and unity with the All. Space and time are felt to be suspended. In Extrovertive mysticism the self is projected out onto the phenomenal world which is no longer experienced in terms of discrete objects. The subject becomes a part of everything which is seen to be One or to have an underlying unity or 'Ground'.³⁶

Commentators generally consider Extrovertive mysticism to be pantheistic (God is in everything) or panenhenic (All in One) and refer to it also as Nature mysticism.³⁷ Dr. R.M. Bucke's term "Cosmic consciousness" is also widely used.³⁸ Forms of Nature mysticism in which the Divine is immanent within creation have been very influential in literature thanks to its development by Spinoza and its subsequent influence on Goethe.³⁹

Introvertive mysticism has been subdivided in R.C. Zaehner's influential typology into Soul or Monistic mysticism and God or Theistic mysticism. In the former the emptying of consciousness is experienced as resulting in the isolation of the self or soul which is seen to be an absolute reality in its own right. The theistic mystic experiences this same detachment from earthly things but goes on to reunite with God. The notion of the return of an essential spirit to its eternal, immortal 'Ground' is found in both Eastern and Western accounts but there is a significant difference in their concepts of the ultimate fate of the self. In Eastern theistic mysticism the self loses its individuality and is absorbed into the Divine Ground. Western accounts however see the soul as being deified, becoming a part of God without losing its individuality.⁴⁰ It is characteristic of mysticism that these categories are not absolute or mutually exclusive. For example, Meister Eckhart's writings belong with Soul mysticism in their emphasis on the pursuit of the soul in its pure or absolute state but this is achieved through the Godhead, resulting in an

affinity with God mysticism too. Thomas Traherne's writings combine Nature and Cristo-centric mysticism while the Upanishads manifest both pantheistic and monistic mysticism. God is seen to be in everything yet they reiterate the need to cast off the earthly and seek the Self beyond it.

The structural similarities of the Absurd and mystical experiences are striking. What obscures this from view however is the difference in terminology which arises from the refusal of the modern mind to see what dwarfs or mystifies and awes it as divine or supernatural.

Religious belief is not in fact a pre-requisite of the mystical experience. The recurrent features of the experience through different times and cultures and religions have earned the phenomenon the title of 'the Perennial Philosophy', in many ways a misnomer because, like the Absurd, mysticism is first and foremost an individual's experience not an intellectual system. The theorising comes afterwards.⁴¹ The experience is 'first-hand', beyond institutions, dogma and theory. Like the Absurd it is recorded as an overwhelming experience which can have the force of a conversion in that it relates to ultimate existential issues. The contact with a new order of reality is of such import that it is seen as an awakening from a state of unconsciousness. "He is known in the ecstasy of an awakening which opens the door of life eternal."⁴² While it arouses extreme emotions the nature of the contact is noetic as well, bringing heightened perception or expanded consciousness. The knowledge which results is not theoretical or deduced but direct or without concepts, and brings a sense of absolute certainty.

Fire.

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,

Not the God of philosophers and scholars.

Absolute Certainty: Beyond reason. Joy. Peace.

Forgetfulness of the world and everything but God.⁴³

Pascal's vision lasted for two hours but the experience is more frequently described as a sudden and brief illumination. "He is seen in Nature in the

wonder of a flash of lightning. He comes to the soul in the wonder of a flash of vision."⁴⁴ The brief glimpse brings however an awareness of the eternal as the subject goes beyond the limits of the temporal, individual and contingent. "I became conscious in myself of eternal life".⁴⁵

It is the structure of the leaving behind of habitual perception, the loss of the anthropomorphic perspective and the revelation of another, fundamental reality which is common to the Absurd and Mysticism. The revealed reality dwarfs humanity and its achievements, and shows it to be subject to forces beyond its control. The Absurd realisation of the factitiousness of human reality parallels the mystic's perception of the transience of all earthly things. After the illumination the everyday affairs of the world seem trivial. St. Teresa of Avila, writing on ecstasy, declared "Oh what torment it is for a soul in this state to have to return to the company of men, to see and watch the sorry farce of this life of ours and to waste time in satisfying such bodily needs as eating and sleeping."⁴⁶ Just as the person who has experienced the Absurd sees human reality as hollow and their life to date as 'deathly' and can no longer wholeheartedly participate in it, so the mystic cannot turn away from the truth which he has seen. "I have seen that which makes all that I have written and taught look small to me. My writing days are over."⁴⁷ So wrote Aquinas, the author of the first attempt at a comprehensive theological system.

The loss of the anthropomorphic perspective is paralleled by a sense of the loss of the individual self or ego and in some cases (for example in Hindu writings) there is a subsequent union with a deeper Self (the Atman).

I passed away into nothingness. I vanished,
And lo, I am the All-living - only God I saw.⁴⁸

I hid my face in the grass, I was wholly prostrated, I lost myself
in the wrestle, I was rapt and carried away.⁴⁹

Both the Absurd and the mystical experiences are seen to involve a return

to origins. Furthermore this return is frequently expressed in terms of a passage from a state of fragmentation or multiplicity to unity.

Who sees the many and not the ONE, wanders on from death to death.⁵⁰

As long as a man has time and place and number and quantity and multiplicity, he is on the wrong track and God is far from him.⁵¹

If the Absurd process of stripping existence of its anthropomorphic garments is an agonising one, the mystical experience can be no less harrowing in the initial phase. St. John of the Cross called the utter dereliction experienced between the casting off of the temporal and the contact with the Divine the "Dark night of the Soul". Joy and harmony are not the only emotions described by mystics. There are also elements of lamentation in their writings. The radical reversal of terms in "La trappola" whereby human life is called death and human beings "tanti piccoli e miseri stagni in attesa di putrefazione" is essentially a mystical one, for to be alive in this world is to be separated from God or the Absolute. In the words of St. John of the Cross: "This life I do not want, for I / Am dying that I do not die."⁵²

The recurrent features of descriptions of mystical experiences have led to certain assertions being made about the nature of human existence and of the universe. These deductions correspond to the Absurd view on many points. Their common starting point is the notion that human reality is a Fallen state, an exile from truth and authenticity. In the 'pure' Absurd view of Camus and Sartre humans are exiled from existence by language and thought. Pirandello and Ionesco share this view and also the mystical one in which existence itself is conceived as an exile or a state of imprisonment. In the Absurd universe humans are imprisoned in what Lacan calls "the Symbolic order" and in the fundamental state of being conscious. The mystic sees one of the sources of imprisonment as the ego or the individual self and another as bodily form or the senses.

Perhaps the most significant similarity between the two phenomena is the tracing of the main source of exile to the manner in which the human mind functions. They both depict the mind as projecting a reality of its own making onto the world and enclosing humans in a shell of illusion. This analysis of reality is found most frequently in Eastern texts and is expressed in strikingly modern terms:

The Immortal is veiled by the real. The Spirit of life is the immortal. Name and form are the real, and by them the Spirit is veiled.⁵³

The view shared by Pirandello and Ionesco that humans habitually experience life from a falsely centralised viewpoint because of the constructing processes of the mind is identical to the Buddhist view of everyday reality. The Buddhist text, "The Tibetan Book of the Dead", which influenced Ionesco's Le Roi se meurt involves teaching people to recognise their projections and pass through them to the true reality.⁵⁴ It is interesting that Adamov, looking back on L'Aveu from his later committed communist standpoint, should have considered it the result of having spent too much time reading "The Tibetan Book of the Dead", that is, reflecting on the nothingness of the human world.⁵⁵

Absurd and mystical experiences both entail the simultaneous perception of truth or essential knowledge along with a recognition of the ultimate impotence of the human mind as an instrument of truth. The rational consciousness is discredited and there results an antithesis between scholarly knowledge and intuitive knowledge or direct experience. This rejection of the intellect is particularly strong and explicit in Eastern writings.

Not through much learning is the Atman reached, not through the intellect and sacred teaching.⁵⁶

He comes to the thought of those who know him beyond thought, not to those who imagine he can be attained by thought.⁵⁷

The privileging of direct knowledge over theory is central to both Piran-

dello and Ionesco. Vitangelo Moscarda and Tommaso Unzio (the latter of the novella "Canta l'Epistola") both contrast the graceful and effortless flight of the birds with that of the aeroplane, a noisy, smelly and dangerous product of engineering. The ultimate failure of science to solve the 'final' problems of existence is an important theme in both Non si sa come and Tueur sans gages.

This mistrust of the intellect results also in a recognition of the emptiness of words. "Many words are weariness", says the Supreme teaching of the Upanishads.⁵⁸ The Absurdist perception that words and concepts form a self-sufficient world of their own which has nothing to do with reality finds many echoes in mystical texts. "Words and mind go to him but reach him not and return."⁵⁹ Even the Bible manages to undermine itself in this manner. "Of making many books there is no end."⁶⁰

A logical consequence of this is a widespread praise of silence. While Eastern texts in particular cite the cessation of the activities of the mind and senses as a pre-requisite of mystical experience, Christian and Islamic texts express a related idea in their advocacy of a passive attitude before the ultimate Reality of God.⁶¹ "In order to be All, do not desire to be anything. In order to know All, do not desire to know anything" is the advice of St. John of the Cross.⁶² In this 'via negativa', the denial of normal reality as a prelude to plenitude, we find a parallel to the Absurd movement from loss, an experience of nothingness, to the recovery of the world in its wholeness.

Annihilate yourself gloriously and joyously in Me and in me you shall find yourself; so long as you do not realise your Nothingness, you will never reach the heights of immortality.⁶³

Bound up with the demise of the intellect and language is the perception that the nature of God or the One or Reality is overwhelming and ineffable. "He is Atman, the Spirit himself, that cannot be seen or touched, that is above all distinction, beyond thought and ineffable."⁶⁴ Meister Eckhart

similarly stresses the need to reject all media. "Thou shalt know him without image, without semblance and without means."⁶⁵

The ineffable Beyondness of the Real and the need for passivity and 'inner' silence mean that talking and writing about mystical experience or the nature of the Reality glimpsed is somewhat paradoxical. The need to use language (because there is nothing else) and the awareness of its flawed and ineffectual nature produces texts which are full of poetic imagery, extended metaphors, word play and in some cases a style whose extreme abstract and bizarre nature can be seen as the direct result of the human mind spiralling and twisting in its attempts to get beyond its own limiting frameworks:

... now we ascend from the particular to the universal conceptions, abstracting all attributes in order that without veil, we may know that Unknowing, which is enshrouded under all that is known and all that can be known, and that we may begin to contemplate the superessential Darkness which is hidden by all the light that is in existing things.⁶⁶

At the very moment when the mystic speaks of his experience he must ensure that his words destroy definitions as well as defining. Paradox then is intrinsic to mystical writing which often seeks to evade dualistic thought and unite opposites: "actionless activity", "wordless teaching".⁶⁷ The writing of Nicholas of Cusa on "learned ignorance" illustrates this struggling of the finite mind with infinity very well. Recounting the mystical revelation which was made to him on a sea journey he describes how he was "led in the learning that is ignorance to grasp the incomprehensible."⁶⁸

The doctrines lying behind these examples from the work of Nicholas of Cusa and the Tao te Ching are very similar and worth elaborating here for the light they shed on the Absurd. The unitive concept of Chinese philosophy is Tao, meaning Primal Meaning, Undivided Unity or Way. The phenomenal universe is seen as emerging from the breaking up of the Tao

into the polar opposites of Yin and Yang which dominate human perception. We can understand darkness only because of light and vice versa. Nicholas of Cusa too sees the human race as trapped in an illusory reality characterised by Duality and seeking to return to the Ultimate Reality in which all opposites coincide.⁶⁹ This vision of the Universe has the same structure as the Pirandellian one in which humans are caught between the antithetical forces of Life and Form until they are released from this tension in death and return to the unitive Ground "Essere".

In as much as the Absurd consists of the onset of the awareness of Duality, it can be seen to be a stepping stone to mystical experience. It shows up the gap between the 'Symbolic' order and Reality. It is only in the mystical experience that the duality is seen to be overcome in the perception of the unity of all things. Absurd man is anguished to see himself exiled by consciousness whereas the mystic briefly transcends this and experiences great harmony.

The Absurd and Mysticism then, present a whole pattern of common and parallel features. The one aspect which differs is of course the nature of the Reality which is revealed. The Absurd revelation is very much of this, material world and of its ultimate meaninglessness. Although mysticism concerns a reality which confers meaning there is nevertheless a certain amount of evidence which suggests that these experiences might be two sides of the same coin.⁷⁰ Although mysticism is popularly associated with the manifestation of the Divine, what many accounts in all traditions indicate is that the experience is primarily a happening in the human consciousness, a matter of perception or vision rather than an event in the external world. Often what the mystic sees is not something vague or ghostly but simply what exists, what is real which is distinct from the habitual, anthropocentric reality. The possible identity of the experiences can be seen in St. Augustine's description of his vision. It is worth noting that

he was writing in a tradition in which God was very much "Thee" and yet he abandons this style in his description which for a number of lines sounds more like the more abstract and impersonal style of Chinese and Buddhist writing. He records how his reasoning faculty detached itself from its normal frameworks "... raised itself up to its own understanding, and drew away my thoughts from the power of habit, withdrawing itself from those troops of contradictory phantasms; ... And thus with the flash of one trembling glance it arrived at THAT WHICH IS."⁷¹ In the light of this it is very tempting to see the Absurd experience as a secular version of the mystical one, to see them as being separated only by historical and cultural factors. In a secular world which lacks transcendental roots, the revelation of the emptiness of human reality and intellectual forces inevitably inspires terror. It undermines the whole basis of modern philosophy. Whereas Descartes located certainty and human identity in consciousness with his "Cogito ergo sum", the Absurd and mystical experiences suggest that "If you think, you are not", thought is the least real aspect of human life.

In their concern to return humans to an 'origin' and to a whole experience of existence, Absurdism and Mysticism both act as a shield against materialism. The Absurd has been seen as a form of protest against the invasion of the human spirit by the dehumanising and mechanising forces of mass society and technology.⁷² That its high point came in the bomb-haunted Cold War years of the fifties is not surprising. In the past mysticism played a similar role. Its great flowering was in fourteenth century Europe, just as the jaws of Renaissance learning were beginning to gnaw at the traditional theocentric view on which the religious institutions of the time were founded. If mystics have often been outcasts and subjected to persecution it is because the mystical experience is ultimately subversive of authority. It champions the individual's experience

against institutions and dogma, the spirit against the letter.

VI The Sources of Mystical Patterns of Thought and Experiences in the Work of Pirandello and Ionesco

It is possible to trace the mystical elements in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco to very precise sources, some of which influenced the whole modern era, while others are relevant to the individual authors. The range and nature of the mystical experiences in each will be discussed in Chapters three and four but at this stage it suffices to note that in both the experiences and their interpretation show parallels with Eastern sources rather than Christian ones. The reality contacted is not personalised and called 'God' (on those rare occasions when it is seen as divine) and in neither is there a mysticism of love. They share with Eastern accounts the 'psychological' approach, that is, a preoccupation with the mental processes surrounding the construction of reality and the relationship between this and the nature of the self. If the Upanishads present the greatest number of parallels in theme and vocabulary it is because they meditate on the issues connected with the experience of light, that is, on the nature of knowledge and Ultimate Reality. They are a search for understanding rather than a coherent system.

Eastern also is the attitude of the two writers to matter. It is useful here to consider two of the fundamental differences between Hindu and Christian mysticism: their attitudes to history and to the Deity. The Christian belief that Jesus was God and Man led to the complete coinherence of matter and spirit, the many and the One. This, together with a love of earthly beauty inherited from the Greeks meant that the material world and earthly existence became valued. The timeless was bound up with time, eternity with history. By contrast, Hindu religious thought turns away from the phenomenal world and earthly life. History is virtually meaningless to it. As in Buddhism, the human spirit aims to escape from

the eternal cycle of rebirth and death. Pirandello and Ionesco share a revulsion for human material form, both for the ageing of flesh and its physical processes and for the fact that it fails to express the spirit which it contains. On the other hand, while Pirandello expresses a vision of the material world as imprisoning the life force, his work also contains many pantheistic moments in which nature, the landscape or the sky are seen to manifest the divine in some way.

A consideration of the sources of the mystical experiences in Pirandello's work helps to clarify such contradictions but it is important to note when attempting to categorise these experiences, the extent to which different mystical traditions fed into and influenced each other. For example, Christian mysticism has its roots in Neoplatonism, a blending of Greek and Oriental philosophy. Dante's description of the ascent into heaven in *Paradiso* was influenced by the Sufi writing of ibn-'Arabī of Spain – Sufism being poetical and metaphysical in nature and characterised particularly by images of love and marriage and intoxication. Furthermore, one of the contentious issues surrounding the flourishing of Catholic mysticism in Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries is the question of the influence of Moslem Sufism which was dominant there in the Middle Ages. The great predecessor of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross was Ramon Llull who was steeped in Islamic culture and Sufi writing. This intermingling of Eastern and Western mystical traditions is apparent too in the individual cultural and intellectual formations of Pirandello and Ionesco.

In the case of Pirandello I am not suggesting that the mystical elements in his work are the result of direct influences. It is more a matter of certain features of his outlook predisposing him towards mysticism or leading logically to mystical thought. Certain figures who did influence him were themselves influenced by mysticism. Schopenhauer's

"The World as Will and Idea" (1818) opens with the remarkably modern assertion "Die Welt ist meine Vorstellung" ("The world is as I represent it"), a declaration which condenses a fundamental tenet both of Buddhist psychology and of Pirandello's "lanterninosofia". Schopenhauer came into contact with Indian metaphysics through reading the Upanishads which "supplied the ultimate confirmation of his pessimistic ethic" rather than actually producing it.⁷³ He recorded the impression this reading had on him with the words "Sie ist der Trost meines Lebens gewesen und wird der meines Sterbens sein" ("it has been the consolation of my life, and will be of my death").

A similar pattern is discernible in the case of one of the main formative aesthetic influences on Pirandello, Friedrich Schlegel. Having been taught Sanskrit by an Englishman returning from India, he translated the Bhagavad Gita into Latin with his brother August. Pirandello came into contact with Buddhist thought through Theosophy which enjoyed popularity in some circles in Italy around the turn of the century and was part of a broader 'fin de siècle' preoccupation with the occult and esoteric knowledge. While, as Antonio Illiano has shown, Theosophy certainly influenced the structure and conception of some of Pirandello's plays and novelle, he did not embrace it personally.⁷⁴ The Buddhist philosophy which he found in Theosophy would have confirmed his pre-existing ideas on consciousness and identity which seem to have a closer affinity with Eastern views rather than the Christian one.

A figure whose work exerted a wider influence over European culture than the figures and cults just discussed is Bergson, whose connections with mysticism are manifold. On the one hand his vitalism, his notion of an "élan vital" can be seen to pave the way for a pantheistic brand of mysticism. On the other hand, his anti-intellectualism - a further development of the Romantic revolt against reason initiated by Rousseau -

gave his work a spiritual basis which provided his contemporaries with an escape from materialism and positivism and contributed to an immense religious revival^{in intellectual circles} in France. Furthermore, his work has been seen to provide a non-spiritual or psychological explanation for mystical experience.⁷⁵ It is interesting that this explanation corresponds very closely to that given in Pirandello's novella "La mano del malato povero" and also in Ionesco's accounts.⁷⁶

Bergson saw that large areas of the mind are unused and invisible. In the first place consciousness is only the tip of an iceberg and secondly that consciousness is normally employed for practical purposes for the most part. To this end, the intellect breaks up reality, time and space into manageable segments and consequently prevents the mind from experiencing reality whole and in its true fluid continuity. The mystical experience comes about when this practical everyday framework is suspended, the intellect rests and another level of consciousness, intuition, comes into play. Reality is then grasped whole as the mind expands its field of vision beyond merely human concerns.

Our knowledge of things derives its form from our bodily functions and lower needs ... By unmaking that which these needs have made, we may restore to Intuition its original purity, and so recover contact with the Real.⁷⁷

This view of consciousness was not only influential because it pandered to the needs of the times and was disseminated with great eloquence by Bergson, but also because he wove around it a theory of the artist as a person who possesses the ability to put aside the everyday networks of meaning and see reality in its purity. In doing so, Bergson provided a theory for and gave added impetus to the Romantic and Symbolist view of the artist as someone in touch with a 'beyond' of some kind. Brief indication of the ubiquity of this view in the early twentieth century will be given in the following section.

The source of the mystical elements in Ionesco's writing is primarily his own "expériences de lumière" which will be examined in Chapter four. However, these intense moments have led him to read religious and mystical texts of a wide range of authors from Plotinus to Buber in search of explanations. He cites in particular St. John of the Cross, Dionys^{us} the Aereopagite and the Byzantine mystics of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as influences, though given the origin of his interest in personal experience, it is difficult to assess the exact extent of these influences.⁷⁸ As well as being personally motivated however, Ionesco has been stimulated in this direction both by his friendship with the Rumanian-born historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, and by the interest in Byzantine religion which existed amongst Rumanian intellectuals in the 1930s.⁷⁹

A further stimulus to Ionesco's innate mystical tendencies must surely have been his membership of the Collège de 'Pataphysique. 'Pataphysics is a kind of pseudo-science or faith invented by Alfred Jarry but only converted into an 'institution' and an entire attitude to life by his followers after the second world war. While Jarry himself was influenced by Occultism, Rosicrucianism, Satanism and Esoteric knowledge, his followers were reacting against the narrow deterministic and generalising tendencies of Positivist science.

The clearest exposition of 'Pataphysics is that by Roger Shattuck who defines it as "... the science of the realm beyond metaphysics; or 'Pataphysics lies as far beyond metaphysics as metaphysics lies beyond physics - in one direction or another."⁸⁰ Emphasising the particular and the exceptional, it is virulently anti-rules, anti-limits and anti-categories in the recognition that all laws and interpretations are arbitrary abstractions from the 'Pataphysical richness of life. But rather than suppressing the activity of the mind as the Eastern mystics do, 'Pataphysics lets it run riot and work openly in conjunction with imagination,

and on this basis proposes a subjunctive or hypothetical mode of living. The attempt of the 'Pataphysician to accommodate the fallibility of all hypotheses about the world has two consequences. Firstly a notion of the equality of all things which in turn results in an ethic of compassion, an argument found also in Pirandello's L'umorismo. Secondly, the 'Pataphysician maintains an attitude of 'imperturbability' which can be seen as a parallel to the stillness of Eastern mystics who attempt to open their minds up to all of reality.

Ionesco's mystical experiences are essentially the imageless rapture of the Introvertive mystics - in Ionesco's own words, "le refus du monde sensible, le refus de l'image pour accéder à une lumière au delà de l'image, sans image ..." (ECB 42). However there are elements of Extrovertive mysticism in his descriptions involving 'purified' perception of the exterior world and a vision of an underlying unity. A notable difference from Pirandellian mystical elements is that Ionesco conceives of the individual self as being fulfilled in the experience. Theosis, the deification of created being, is central to the beliefs of the Byzantine mystics whose writings draw very heavily on light imagery.

Certain of his works show the influence of specific mystical writings. The structure of Le Roi se meurt is marked not only by the Tibetan Book of the Dead but also by the Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad.⁸¹ His last play to date, Voyages chez les morts (1981) reflects the influence of Gnostic texts which, on the evidence of articles published in Un Homme en Question, Ionesco was reading around 1978.⁸²

VII Literary and Artistic Parallels

The citing of such influential names as Schopenhauer and Bergson as sources of mystical thought would suggest that the literary and artistic use of mystical elements was not confined to Pirandello and Ionesco. This is indeed the case. To a certain extent movements such as Expressionism, Dada and Surrealism were simply carrying on the Romantic revolt and the Symbolist tradition but the particular social conditions in Europe and the rise of psychology gave an extra impulse and authority to their aims. Whatever their differences of artistic theory and practice, these movements were all reacting against the same vision of Western civilisation as derelict and burdened by materialistic Bourgeois values and a myopic Positivism. The unity between inner and outer worlds had been broken up and the spiritual life of the individual was being suffocated. Common to Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism, is the urge to break through conventional reality into a beyond of some kind. Where they differ is primarily in the manner of revolt and in the nature of that beyond.

The close affinities between Pirandello's work and Expressionism have been convincingly demonstrated by Graziella Corsinovi through examination of their sources, aesthetic theories and close analysis of Pirandello's prose writing, particularly his early work which pre-dates the Expressionist movement.⁸³ She not only delineates the fundamental urge to go beyond the here and now, the 'given', as the central concern in both, but also shows that their 'beyonds' share the characteristic of diversity and have the same function and interpretation.

Ionesco's connections with Expressionism can be seen to be more direct. He was a personal friend of Kandinsky and has experienced the phenomenon as a 'fait accompli', as it were. Pirandello's work shares its historical and cultural background and runs almost parallel to it.

Mysticism is relevant to Expressionism in several ways: it is a key experience in their works but it also informs their view of the artist and the role of the work of art. Whereas in Pirandello's work we can isolate the visionary element from the author's person, in Expressionism it is almost impossible to discuss the experiences without also talking about the art and the artist. Two major influences are relevant here. Theosophy, which Kandinsky took very seriously, and Bergson, whose view of the artist and art suited perfectly the Expressionist exaltation of intuition and the subjective consciousness. Art for the Expressionists became a means of return to a spontaneous, pure perception, and therefore of a confrontation with the reality existing outside the corrupting forms of society. Oskar Kokoschka in particular shares Ionesco's view of the artist as someone who "deve riconquistare 'una purezza aurorale' e vedere il mondo come 'neonato appena caduto dal grembo materno'".⁸⁴ Art was an instrument for the establishment of a lost unity with the world. Corsinovi notes:

Di fronte all'assurdo della vita, dinnanzi al quale la ragione "questo terribile contrassegno dell'umanità, sta profondamente scossa" (Werfel), la visione artistica è l'unico modo per "enucleare dalla dispersa molteplicità del reale" (Sternheim) "l'unica forma a priori in grado di ricomporre l'atomizzazione babelica delle cose" (Kaiser).⁸⁵

The visionary element in Expressionism was first made explicit and integrated into artistic theory by Kandinsky in his essay "On the Spiritual in Art" (1911). In practice, the visionary element took the form of a Christian apotheosis in some cases but was more commonly a vaguer type of extrovertive, nature mysticism. A sense of a living unity behind the objects of the universe is prevalent amongst Expressionists and indicates that their mysticism is no mere secularised re-working of traditional mysticism. Jawlensky talks of the colour of apples "reproducing this or that mood of my soul, this or that fleeting contact with the soul of things, with that Something, unsuspected and ignored by all, which trembles

in every object of the material world, in every impression that we receive from outside ourselves."⁸⁶ Franz Marc's mysticism took the form of a discovery of the pristine natural world alongside that of his own spiritual awakening. An entirely fresh relationship between the self and the world comes about in which the self is revived rather than denied. He saw his painting as defining that "... unearthly being which lives behind everything", "indivisible Being" as he calls it elsewhere. Kandinsky talks of contacting "the secret soul of ^{all} things" by developing an "inner seeing" which will allow us to apprehend the inner pulsation of things with all our senses at once. Barlach refers to "the living features of eternity", Nolde to a "primal essence".⁸⁷ As in Pirandello's mystical accounts, the sense of the divine is often achieved through landscapes and objects. This nature mysticism led to a model of the creative process which dates back to Romanticism and Goethe, namely 'organic creation' whereby the artist tuned his inner world into the forces of nature, penetrating "deep down to the source of All" (Klee) and then acted as medium for the energies tapped there by using intuition rather than intellect.⁸⁸

The Expressionist mystical 'tool' is ecstasy rather than contemplation or stillness. A privileging of intense emotion over reason is one aspect of the Expressionist preoccupation with the individual self but paradoxically ecstasy, the bursting of the bounds of the self, became a key feature of their artistic creation. "Authentic life can only be grasped in ecstasy" maintained Theodor Däubler.⁸⁹ This tension between an intense sense of self and yet a consciousness of a transcendent Unity is also to be found in Ionesco's work in the same forms as in Expressionism. On one level there is the paradoxical view of the artist as seer or prophet, possessing extraordinary faculties and yet also as representative of humanity, an externaliser of the collective consciousness.⁹⁰ There is also a swinging between impulses - one towards annihilation and another towards

an intensification of life, what Ionesco calls "une dilatation euphorique du moi" in which the self fills the void. They are torn between the need to unite with a beyond and the need to maintain their unique identity, to be at the centre of the universe and very much in control of their art. This is "a mysticism which, so to speak, has it all ways." says Roger Cardinal. "This combination of the general and the particular, this union of the universal and the monad, is, I would suggest, a characteristic paradox of Expressionistic thought (if indeed it may be said to be grounded in conceptual terms.)"⁹¹

This double stance might be almost Pirandellian if it were not for the fact that like the Romantics, the Expressionists took their inner life and private sufferings very seriously. The Pirandellian sense of illusion and vanity, and consequently an ironic distance are entirely lacking in the Expressionist whose irreducible sense of self contrasts ^{with} the Pirandellian view of its fluidity. Where Pirandello does parallel the Expressionist however, is in the types of visionary experience portrayed. The cosmic and the microcosmic (my terms) are present in both:

While here and there Kandinsky will equate mystic feeling with the trivia of urban existence, extracting his epiphany from "a cigarette butt lying in an ashtray, a patient white trouser button looking up from a puddle in the street", it is the usual case that Expressionist mystical feeling addresses itself to the unconstrained spaces of nature ... attaining its apotheosis in images of mountains, lakes and forests.⁹²

Finally the mysticism of Expressionism is double in another sense which relates it to both Pirandello and Ionesco. Ecstasy and joy are intimately related to anguish and insecurity, "the positive is unthinkably drawn out of the negative. ... as if light were born of the deepest dark, hope out of horror."⁹³

While the ecstatic moment of awakening was a constant theme in Expressionist art, in Dada and Surrealism the emphasis lies rather on art as a means of bursting out of the bourgeois into the beyond. Although some

of the Zürich Dadaists had worked on Expressionist journals, Dada presents some vital differences in its attitude to the beyond and in fact it ultimately criticised Expressionism for its self-centred soul-searching. If they both started out with a revolt against the degraded state of language, the Expressionists went in the direction of a return to a state of directness and purity while the Dadaists attacked language per se and were so conscious of its inability to reflect flux that they often destroyed their own work or subsided into silence. Revolt followed by renewal is the Expressionist project, while the Dadaists insisted on permanent revolution.

If the Expressionist beyond was some kind of transcendent, universal Being in nature, that of the Dadaists and Surrealists was less spiritual and transcendent. Nor were they interested in brief glimpses followed by a return to normal consciousness. They sought to integrate the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious and thereby create reality anew. There is nothing supernatural in their mysticism – it is very much the 'other' side of conventional reality and is present here and now if human perception can be changed and trained to see it. Their search is mystical in its main thrust as Robert Short has pointed out: "the central ambition of the movement has been to discover some unitary principle or totality behind the atomisation of modern life."⁹⁴ Like the Dadaists and Expressionists, the Surrealists put aside Aristotelian logic, but they did not reject the human mind as an instrument of exploration. They believed in its potential to develop new ways of thinking which would produce new principles of coherence. Ultimately they rejoiced in the magical power of language as a path to the beyond. Whereas the Expressionist artist used his art to communicate what he, as an individual, had glimpsed, the Dadaists and Surrealists saw themselves as helping their fellow humans towards the new reality by means of their art.

A further notable but less well known mystical tendency in the arts at

the outset of the century was simultanism which may be seen in retrospect to embrace also cubism. The term was the invention of Apollinaire and grew out of his interest in Cubist painting and in the work of Delaunay. Cubism too displayed a unitary impulse behind its technique of fragmentation: by depicting several facets of a single object simultaneously it aimed to embrace it in its entirety. Apollinaire initially used the word simultanism to refer to visual art but it soon came to be applied to poetry (Cendrars and Reverdy) and the arts in general. As with Cubism, the dismemberment of logical and conventional forms and perspectives is made in the name of a search for unity and wholeness.⁹⁵ According to Shattuck, it aimed "to reveal the entire universe in its potential unity at a moment of time."⁹⁶ The quest was at once earthly and spiritual. "The aspiration of simultanism is to grasp the moment in its total significance or, more ambitiously to manufacture a moment which surpasses our usual perception of time and space."⁹⁷ It is significant that the techniques employed in the service of this quest are also those of Pirandello and Ionesco: "... all parts interpenetrate and interreact through contrast and humorous conflict rather than by discursive logic or conventional perspective."⁹⁸

Shattuck sees simultanism as the modern continuation of an age-old urge. "The history of the attitude that produced simultanism reaches as far back as human consciousness. Most religious experience expresses it."⁹⁹ Yet he rightly notes that religious impulses underpin the art of the "Banquet Years" as a whole. The "... eruption of dream into waking experience" is one of its major traits which, "... overtaking occultism, stood for a whole visionary and mystical tradition in the arts."¹⁰⁰ Dream itself was not the object of the quest but was conceived as a tool in the exploration of the beyond. "The employment of dream techniques in the arts implied an effort to reach beyond the bounds of waking consciousness toward faculties that could grapple with unrestricted intuitions of time and

space."¹⁰¹

From this brief survey it would seem that non-theistic religious impulses gave an apparent unity of purpose to the explosive variety in the arts in early twentieth century. Yet the variety within that underlying mystical tendency itself is equally important. The nuances, variations and inconsistencies can be seen to point to a desperate desire to find outlets for spiritual impulses. Pirandello and Ionesco share that desire but also take it deeper into the core of their work by exploring mystical experience explicitly.

NOTES: CHAPTER 2

- ¹ Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p.24.
- ² Antonio Illiano, "A View of the Italian Absurd from Pirandello to Eduardo de Filippo", p.59.
- ³ See Arnold P. Hinchliffe, The Absurd, Chs. 1 and 2.
- ⁴ W.I. Oliver, "Between Absurdity and the Playwright", in Modern Drama (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp.3 and 5.
- ⁵ Jean Paul Sartre, La Nausée (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1938), p.181. (Hereafter cited in the text as LN.)
- ⁶ A. Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p.7.
- ⁷ Oliver, p.6. Following G. Serres, David Bradby defines these authors in terms of the "newness" of their theatrical idiom. Modern French Drama 1940-1980 (C.U.P., 1984), p.56.
- ⁸ Albert Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, Les Essais vol.12, (Paris: Gallimard nrf, 1942), p.11. (Hereafter cited in the text as LMS.)
- ⁹ Arthur Adamov, "L'Aveu", in Je ... Ils ... (Paris: Gallimard nrf, 1969), p.27.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p.30.
- ¹¹ LMS, 35. Discussing the "logic of simultanism", Roger Shattuck makes a similar point to Camus': "In the way it confounds conventional thought processes, has not this 'logic' steered a parallel course to relativistic physical science which has had to describe the universe in such poetic metaphors as 'light years', 'bent' space, absolute negative temperatures and 'audible' radio stars?" The Banquet Years: The Arts in France 1885-1918 (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), p.269.
- ¹² Ionesco too remarks on the indifference of the world to human concepts: "La beauté du monde se passe de nos fantasmes qui sont la justice, la charité, la morale" (HQ 100).
- ¹³ It seems likely that Nietzsche was an influence here. In The Birth of Tragedy he describes the Dionysiac trance as involving the fragmenting of everyday reality followed by loss of self and then union with another reality through ecstasy. Nietzsche refers to Hamlet in this connection - a reference which must surely lie behind Pirandello's view of modern tragedy as described in Il fu Mattia Pascal (TR 383-4):

"While the transport of the Dionysiac state, with its suspension of all the ordinary barriers of existence, lasts, it carries with it a Lethean element in which everything that has been experienced by the individual is drowned. This chasm of oblivion separates the quotidian reality from the Dionysiac. But as soon as that quotidian reality enters consciousness once more it is viewed with loathing, and the consequence is an ascetic, abulic state of mind. In this sense Dionysiac man might be said to resemble Hamlet: both have looked deeply into the true nature of things, they have

UNDERSTOOD and are now loath to act. They realise that no action of theirs can work any change in the eternal condition of things, ... Understanding kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion;... What, both in the case of Hamlet and of Dionysiac man, overbalances any motive leading to action, is not reflection but understanding, the apprehension of truth and its terror. Now no comfort any longer avails, desire reaches beyond the transcendental world, beyond the gods themselves, and existence, together with its gulling reflection in the gods and an immortal Beyond is denied. The truth once seen, man is aware everywhere of the ghastly absurdity of existence,....: nausea invades him."

The Birth of Tragedy, trans. F. Golffing (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), pp.51-2.

14 Adamov, p.30.

15 See also JM 58.

16 See also JM 144.

17 See also PPPP 231.

18 See PPPP 231 and 232.

19 Adamov, p.31.

20 Ibid., p.32.

21 Ibid., p.33.

22 Ibid., p.41.

23 Ibid., pp.27-8.

24 Ibid., p.28.

25 Ibid., p.51.

26 Ibid., p.28.

27 Ibid., p.45.

28 Ibid., p.45.

29 Ibid., p.31.

30 Ibid., p.51.

31 Ronald Hepburn talks of the "impressive convergences of testimony on fundamentals among mystics of different periods and parts of the world, ..." "Nature and Assessment of Mysticism", in Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. Mysticism (1967), vol.5.

32 See William J. Wainwright, Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications, Harvester Studies in Philosophy (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1981), pp.18-27.

33 Ibid., p.39.

34 These distinctions can be found in Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness, 12th edn., rev. (London: Methuen, 1930), and in F.C. Happold, Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology, rev.edn. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

35 Walter Stace, Mysticism and Philosophy (London: Macmillan and Co., 1960).

36 The term "Ground" is Eckhart's but it has passed into general circulation amongst commentators on mysticism.

37 R.C. Zaehner in Mysticism, Sacred and Profane (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) distinguishes three types of mysticism – Nature, Soul and God mysticism – though in a later work, Concordant Discord (Oxford, 1970) he defined four, the fourth being a feeling of transcending temporal limitations with an accompanying realisation of immortality. Zaehner believed this experience could accompany nature mysticism.

38 The term is from the title of Bucke's book The Cosmic Consciousness: a Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind (New York: Dutton, 1956).

39 "The history of Western philosophy since the Middle Ages includes a form of thought best characterised as cosmic mysticism,... According to this view, in a universe that often seemed to be absurd and threatening, man could find meaning by identifying himself with its structures and purposes and by cultivating attitudes of reverence and commitment." Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1974 edn., s.v. "Mysticism".

40 Happold, pp.44-5.

41 "The mystic insight begins with the sense of a mystery unveiled, of hidden wisdom now suddenly become certain beyond the possibility of a doubt. The sense of certainty and revelation comes earlier than any definite belief. The definite beliefs at which mystics arrive are the result of reflection upon the inarticulate experience gained in the moment of insight". Bertrand Russell, Mysticism and Logic quoted by Warner Allen in The Timeless Moment (London: Faber and Faber, 1931), p.11. Happold explains the 'Perennial Philosophy' without reference to the originator of the term. Aldous Huxley attributes it to Leibniz in his book The Perennial Philosophy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946), p.1.

42 The Upanishads, trans. Juan Mascarò (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p.52. Compare Wordsworth in "Intimations of Immortality":

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:"

lines 58-61

43 Pascal quoted by Happold, p.39.

44 The Upanishads, p.53.

45 Dr. R.M. Bucke, quoted in Happold, p.136.

46 Quoted by Stephen Clissold, The Wisdom of the Spanish Mystics (New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 1977), p.36.

47 Quoted in The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1974 edn., s.v. "Religious Experience".

48 Baba Kuhi of Shiraz. Quoted by Happold, p.251.

49 Richard Jefferies, The Story of my Heart. Quoted by Happold, p.388. Compare Eckhart: "Henceforth I shall not speak about the soul, for she has lost her name yonder in the oneness of divine essence. There she is no more called soul: she is called infinite being." Quoted by Happold, p.275.

50 The Upanishads, p.63. See also the Buddhist poem "On Trust in the Heart":

"When the deep mystery of one Suchness is fathomed,
All of a sudden we forget the external entanglements;
When the ten thousand things are viewed in their oneness,
We return to the origin and remain where we ever have been."

Quoted in Happold, p.167.

51 Meister Eckhart, Selected Treatises and Sermons, trans. J.M. Clark and J.V. Skinner (London: 1958), p.202.

52 "Coplas about the soul which suffers with impatience to see God". Poems of St. John of the Cross, trans. Roy Campbell, Pref. M.C. D'Arcy, S.J. (Glasgow: Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1979), p.35.

53 The Upanishads, p.127.

54 In an interview with Bernard-Claude Gauthier, Ionesco says of the dénouement of Le Roi se meurt "cette fin est très influencée par 'Le Livre des Morts tibétain'" and goes on to explain that not one critic has understood the meaning of the King's return to his throne which symbolises the "régions privilégiées" to which the dying person goes when he has successfully freed himself from all 'human' feelings. "Le rêve et le bretzel", Construire (Geneva), no.14, 4th April 1984.

55 Adamov, p.10.

56 The Upanishads, p.60.

57 Ibid., p.52.

58 Ibid., p.142.

59 Ibid., p.110.

60 Ecclesiastes, 12:12. See also the Buddhist poem "On Trust in the Heart":

"Wordiness and intellection -
The more with them, the further astray we go;"

Quoted in Happold, p.165.

61 "When the five senses and the mind are still, and reason itself rests in silence, then begins the Path supreme." The Upanishads, p.65.

62 The Ascent of Mount Carmel, 1:13. Quoted in Happold, p.361. Compare Nicholas of Cusa: "It behoveth, then, the intellect to become ignorant and to abide in darkness if it would fain see thee." Happold, p.339.

63 Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Religious Experience".

64 The Upanishads, p.83.

65 Meister Eckhart: Sermons. Quoted in Happold, p.273.

66 Dionysius the Areopagite. Quoted in Happold, p.215. Meister Eckhart exhorts:

"Love him as he is: a not-God, a not-spirit, a not-Person, a not-image; as sheer, pure, limpid unity, alien from all duality. And in this one let us sink down eternally from nothingness to nothingness."

Quoted in Happold, p.274.

67 From the Tao te Ching, quoted in Happold, p.150.

68 Quoted in Happold, p.334.

69 See also "On Trust in the Heart":

"The ignorant cherish the idea of rest and unrest,
The enlightened have no likes and dislikes;
All forms of dualism
Are contrived by the ignorant themselves."

Ionesco's friend and philosophical mentor, Stéphane Lupasco, attempts in his "Logique et contradiction" to construct a non-dualistic, anti-Aristotelian logic. This work is referred to in Victimes du devoir.

70 It is significant that Sartre's descriptions of the Absurd experience in La Nausée were influenced by his experiments with the drug Mescaline and that Aldous Huxley believed that what he experienced after taking Mescaline was "contemplation at its height". The Doors of Perception (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954), p.31.

71 Augustine's emphasis, quoted in Happold, pp.230-1. Mystics and Absurdists share a belief in the power of habit to distract the mind from the absolute reality:

It is injurious to the mind as well as to the body to be always in one place and always surrounded by the same circumstances. A species of thick clothing slowly grows about the mind, the pores

are choked, little habits become a part of existence, and by degrees the mind is enclosed in a husk. When this began to form I felt eager to escape from it, to throw it off like heavy clothing, to drink deeply once more at the fresh fountains of life.

Richard Jefferies, The Story of my Heart, quoted in Happold, p.385.

72 See Illiano, p.72.

73 R.J. Hollingdale, Introduction to Schopenhauer's Essays and Aphorisms (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p.31.

74 Antonio Illiano, Metapsichica e Letteratura in Pirandello (Florence: Casa Editrice Vallecchi, 1982). See, for example, Illiano's analysis of "La casa del Granella" in Chapter IV.

75 Evelyn Underhill, "Bergson and the Mystics", English Review, Feb. 1912 vol.10 (1911-12), pp.511-522.

76 Both Gösta Andersson and De Castris come to the conclusion that Pirandello's vitalism was not Bergsonian in origin. See Arte e Teoria (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1966), p.143, and Storia di Pirandello, pp.82 and 194.

77 Bergson quoted by Underhill, op cit., p.516. Compare Blake:

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."

78 ECB 29, 41-42. During the writing of La Quête intermittente (1987) Ionesco was reading St. Augustine, LQI 33 and 85.

79 See M. Eliade: "Eugène Ionesco and 'la Nostalgie du Paradis'", in The Two Faces of Ionesco, ed. Lamont and Friedman (Troy New York: Whitson Publishing Company, 1978), pp.21-27.

80 Roger Shattuck, "Superliminal Note", in Evergreen Review, vol.4, no.13 (May-June 1960), p.131.

81 See Mircea Eliade, "Lumière et transcendance dans l'oeuvre d'Eugène Ionesco", in Ionesco: Situation et perspectives, papers from the Colloque de Cérisy (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1980), pp.117-127.

82 HQ 14-15.

83 Graziella Corsinovi, Pirandello e l'Espressionismo (Genova: Tilgher- Genova, 1979). Mysticism is more relevant to Expressionist painting and prose and poetry than to Expressionist theatre where the emphasis lay primarily on expressing the inner life.

84 Ibid., p.66 note 57.

85 Ibid., p.67 note 59.

86 Wolf-Dieter Dübe, trans. Mary Whittall, The Expressionists (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p.115.

87 Quoted in Roger Cardinal, Expressionism, Paladin Movements and Ideas (London: Granada, 1984), pp.81-2. This section is much indebted to the Chapter "The Spiritual Impulse".

88 Ibid., p.83.

89 Ibid., p.74.

90 See PPPP 63, 215, 217. JM 39.

91 Cardinal, pp.78-9.

92 Ibid., p.138, note 26.

93 Ibid., p.125.

94 Robert Short, "Surrealism", Chapter 7 of French Literature and its Background, vol.6, ed. J. Cruickshank (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.122.

95 "The romantic abandon to the desire to be somewhere else, in another time, and in another person swelled the [classical] unities beyond recognition,... The modern sensibility, however, began to proceed not so much by untrammelled expansion of the unities as by a violent dislocation of them in order to test the possibility of a new coherence." Roger Shattuck, The Banquet Years, p.256.

96 Ibid., p.270.

97 Ibid., p.266.

98 Ibid., pp.238-9.

99 Ibid., p.266.

100 Ibid., p.28.

101 Ibid., p.28.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FUNCTION OF THE VISIONARY ELEMENT IN PIRANDELLO

I Introduction

"C'è un oltre in tutto" (TR 1109). These words of Serafino Gubbio point to the heart of both Pirandello's vision of the world and of his artistic practice. Pirandello the humorist dismantles appearances and reveals what lies beyond them. As a relativist, he shows how there is always the possibility of another version of the truth or another point of view behind the so-called facts. As a dramatist he invites his audience to look beyond the neat surfaces of the well-made, fully rehearsed play, and as a writer of novels and novelle he evokes the minute and fleeting processes beyond identity and consciousness. This chapter will take as its focus his treatment of the Beyond in its special sense of a dimension existing beyond normal human perception and material existence but which is glimpsed, intuited or contacted in visionary moments.

Direct reference to Theosophy, ghosts and the occult will be excluded. Antonio Illiano has analysed how Pirandello's concern with Theosophy fused with his interest in psychology and relativity, and influenced the structure of his work and his concept of the dramatic character.¹ Ghosts tend to serve as a narrative pretext in the novelle "La casa del Granella" and "Dal naso al cielo". Pirandello is not here expressing belief in ghosts but using them as an emblem of the irrational in order to challenge the myopia and materialism of Positivism.

The object of my investigation in this chapter is a particular type of visionary experience which forms an integral part of Pirandello's vision

and which is, I believe, generally underestimated. Writing on "Sogno di Natale", Frederick May notes that it "exhibits a Pirandello too often ignored. He had little time for the Establishment in any form, but (while avoiding the Church as an institution) he remained a religious man".²

De Castris' Storia di Pirandello is one critical work which attempts to place this phenomenon in the context of Pirandello's overall development, and while I agree with the main thrust of his arguments with regard to Pirandello's later work, I believe that his desire to map out a neat pattern leads him to misconstrue Pirandello in places.

De Castris maintains that the visionary moments are an illusory escape ("fuga illusoria") and that "Lungi dal consolarsene, la creatura da quell' impossibile fuga nell'eterno tornava, sconsolata e deietta, a dissugarsi e perire nella folle inconsistenza del tempo."³ This glosses over both the variety of visionary experiences found in Pirandello's work and the diversity of their roles and presentation. As the last chapter showed, mystical experience coincides very closely with what is known of Pirandello's own views of the universe and of human consciousness. Moreover, the links examined between Absurdism and Mysticism show that despair creates the necessary detachment from routines and habits to enable the mind to perceive reality from a different standpoint. In Pirandello the visionary moment cannot be reduced to a fantasy of freedom and peace.

In De Castris' view, the "entusiasmo 'panteistico'" and the "stupore surrealistico delle ultime creature di Pirandello" constitute a forced 'volte-face' in Pirandello's artistic development ("una deviazione e un sostanziale snaturamento"⁴) because they suddenly reverse the value of the irrational, making it positive instead of negative.⁵ De Castris sees Pirandello as 'destined' to express the human fear of flux and chaos and the desire for form and order. He blames Pirandello's late deviation from this path partly on the influence of Tilgher whose famous formula led

Pirandello to identify the visionary moment with a contact with Life, thereby altering the nature of his anti-intellectualism from the sceptical kind to the Bergsonian, vitalistic kind. Given this new connotation the visionary moment ceases to be momentary and becomes a state, a solution to the anguish of human duality.⁶ This, according to De Castris, is Pirandello's downfall and betrayal of his true artistic destiny:

Quando ... l'evasione pretende di porsi come conquista reale, liberazione definitiva, comportamento "positivo" del personaggio, allora si scopre il limite sentimentale ed artistico del tentativo pirandelliano, si rivela la volontà astratta di rendere fede permanente ed esaltante quella antica valvola di purezza: ...⁷

My purpose in this chapter is to modify De Castris' view of the visionary moments by showing the different variations of the experience portrayed by Pirandello and the different roles these experiences play in his texts. A positive, pantheistic irrational is by no means confined to Pirandello's later work and I believe De Castris has overestimated Tilgher's influence here. Both critics fail to note the ambiguous values of Life and Form throughout Pirandello's work. Some of the features of Pirandello's early treatment of mysticism examined here will also be seen in a later chapter to anticipate features of his writing which De Castris attributes to an "affanno senile" to indulge "velleità ottimistiche". An examination of the visionary element in Pirandello alongside some associated motifs (such as the figure of the 'dimissionario') and from the point of view of style and artistic procedures shows that "la dimensione lirica dell'ultimo Pirandello" is not a betrayal of his art but part of a consistent pattern of variations on a theme.

The notion of a mysterious beyond is central to Pirandello's thematic and aesthetic concerns. His work is imbued with a sense of the mystery of life, a sense of the uncanny. Where this mystery is not the central concern of a work it will often manifest itself in small details, as a latent theme which is not pursued or developed. A.R. Sogliuzzo notes

Pirandello's propensity for lighting effects which suggest the presence of spiritual or other-worldly forces.

In works such as Quando si è qualcuno light and theme are organically interrelated whereas in his more realistic plays such as L'Amica delle Mogli the mysterious lighting implies but never fully develops the notion of mysterious forces interacting with our destinies. Rather than exploring such a theme through dialogue or physical action, Pirandello includes it in a lighting effect; an existent but inexplicable phenomenon thus adding a mystical dimension to an essentially realistic work.⁸

As an abiding concern the theme is often closely intertwined with the other 'beyonds' in Pirandello's work – the unconscious, memory, "pensieri strani" which flash within the mind, and repressed sexuality.

As this list indicates, the 'beyond' is by turns vitalistic, ghostly, psychological or spiritual, sometimes a combination of these. I would like to suggest that it is often this visionary element which provides a sub-textual emotional and imaginative tension in much of Pirandello's narrative writing and in certain monologues in his plays. The reader or audience is promised a revelation; there are indications in the text that the secret of the universe is round the next corner so that their sense of the other-worldly is awakened and tantalised. I would argue that the compulsive appeal of Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore lies not so much in the meta-theatrical pyrotechnics as in the sheer suggestiveness of the 'descent' of the characters with their "stranissima luce" (1921 version) and the final projection of terrifying silhouettes (1925 version). Such imaginative devices return the theatre to its original function as a means of communion with other worlds and a contemplation of the mysteries of existence.

The visionary moment also takes its place amongst Pirandello's well-known aesthetic procedures. The moment involves a different level of reality breaking into the habitual one and therefore a clash of perspectives. Such doubling may be seen to be related to metatheatrical devices: the focusing on the interaction and relationship between character and

actor, actor as person and actor as character, audience and stage. The juxtaposition of realities or levels of awareness is the basic structure of 'umorismo' as Pirandello defines it: the contradictory messages communicated by "avvertimento" and "sentimento", by mask and face, body and shadow, appearance and reality; the dismantling of the apparent solidity of reality to reveal a terrible emptiness beneath it. Even Pirandello's use of the grotesque shares in this configuration of doubling: the unjust disparity between outer form (body) and the soul within. During the visionary moment the subject achieves the Janusian look: while bodily earthbound and finite, the mind transcends the material here and now and attains a cosmic perception of the timeless whole. This absurd doubling of perspectives, the earthly and the cosmic has quite concrete narrative consequences as Antonio Illiano has pointed out:

Pirandello had already intuited a deeper dimension of the absurd [than the Grotteschi] in the mind that perceives the human condition and in the irrepressible awareness of its irrationality and senselessness. This awareness is really at the core of all absurdist creations, and it is largely on the basis of its meaning and function that one can fully understand the impact that the all-pervading first person narrative has had on a substantial section of modern literature.⁹

Another Pirandellian device which manifests this doubling of types of awareness is the "colloquio coi morti" found in "Prima notte", "Colloquio coi personaggi" and "Notizie del mondo". Similarly, the setting of All'uscita evinces this concern to look on life both from beyond and within. The visionary moment then forms part of the pattern of "dédoublement" studied by J-M Gardair, which he shows to have had its roots in Pirandello's personal experience.¹⁰ A letter to Antonietta of 1894 testifies to Pirandello's own awareness of this state of being torn between two types of consciousness. This awareness was translated into short story form with the "Dialoghi tra il Gran Me e il piccolo me".

In me son quasi due persone: Tu già ne conosci una; l'altra, neppur la conosco bene io stesso. Soglio dire, ch'io consto d'un

gran me e d'un piccolo me: questi due signori son quasi sempre in guerra tra di loro; l'uno è spesso all'altro sommamente antipatico. Il primo è taciturno e assorto continuamente in pensieri, il secondo parla facilmente, scherza e non è alieno dal ridere e dal far ridere.... Io sono perpetuamente diviso tra queste due persone.]]

II The Visionary Moment in the Novelle and "I vecchi e i giovani"

Pirandello's work manifests many different types of religious experience. I use the term in the sense in which it is used by William James in his study Varieties of Religious Experience¹² where he separates religious belief, dogma and orthodoxy from all kinds of first-hand experience ranging from awe and wonder at the cosmos, intuitions and brief insights into the divine to the full-blown mystical sense of unity with a world spirit of some kind.

i) "Prima Notte" and "I vecchi e i giovani"

Frederick May, referring again to "Sogno di Natale" draws attention to "the visionary moonlit scene, of a type which is recurrent throughout his work, and almost always ... linked with regeneration and rebirth."¹³ This type of visionary moment recurs fairly frequently but is the least explicit in Pirandello's canon. The presence of a transcendental beyond is suggested in the mysterious calm of the protagonists and by the use of symbols of other-worldliness such as moon and stars. These moments tend to occur at the height of the character's suffering or at a crucial point in their lives. In "Prima notte", Marastella, still grieving for her lost love, is obliged to marry an older, widowed man. Left alone with him for the first time:

Marastella restò presso porta, che la madre, uscendo, aveva raccostata, e con le mani sul volto si sforzava di soffocare i singhiozzi irrompenti, quando un alito d'aria schiuse un poco, silenziosamente, quella porta.

Ancora con le mani sul volto, ella non se n'accorse: le parve invece che tutt'a un tratto - chi sa perché - le si aprisse dentro come un vuoto delizioso, di sogno; sentì un lontano, tremulo scampanello di grilli, una fresca inebriante fragranza di fiori. Si tolse le mani dagli occhi: intravide nel cimitero un chiarore, più che d'alba, che pareva incantasse ogni cosa, là immobile e precisa (NA I 93-4).

The effect of this moment is partly achieved by the recurring chiaroscuro image of the cemetery in the moonlight, "perduto lassú nel silenzio": an image of death and fixity which corresponds to the state of mind of the two protagonists who are both pining for their dead. This final calm immobility contrasts with the violence of the girl's emotion and the manner of the deaths of her father and lover in a storm at sea.

The motifs of inner emptiness, dream, distance and a sense of inebriation recur in nearly all Pirandellian visionary moments, whatever their type. The character is granted a brief moment of respite and consolation as his or her attention is drawn, often by means of the landscape or the sky, away from the immediate dilemma out to a 'cosmic' perspective. For a moment they stand outside the dialectic of Life and Form. The immensity of the landscape or the sky does not bring a pantheistic contact with a life force but rather dwarfs human affairs by revealing their vanity and ephemerality.¹⁴ For characters to whom life has been cruel, this perspective is paradoxically comforting. Their situation is not changed by their glimpse of another dimension nor is their suffering given justification or explanation. It merely offers an awareness that a reality exists beyond their individual circumstances. And while time stands still for the characters as they experience a change of perspective or 'consciousness', the reader is given a change of style. Action or dialogue gives way to a lyrical interlude in what May calls Pirandello's "incantational" style. Adjectives are used to create a rhythm as well as for visual effect: "un lontano, tremulo scampanellio di grilli, una fresca inebriante fragranza di fiori." The existence of some other-worldly presence is barely hinted^{at} in the personification of the moon which 'sees' and 'watches' the two figures bathed in moonlight "in quella dolce notte d'aprile."

This kind of visionary experience is employed on a broader scale in the novel I vecchi e i giovani where it is closely bound up with the

historical theme. The clash of perspectives here is akin to that found in Ionesco's work: against a background of social and political turmoil, the dreamy, timeless immobility of the Sicilian landscape repeatedly forces the characters to view their situation from a distanced standpoint. Historical events and the struggles of individuals are constantly put into a context of timeless infinity; the eternal breaks in on the contingent.

The plethora of visionary experience here serves to underline the theme of the futility of political change. The novel is full of violent events - murder, suicide, political scandal, adulterous passion - yet none of the plans comes to fruition. Ippolito's marriage fails, Dianella breaks down and becomes insane as do Mauro Mortara and Nino del Re; Nicoletta Capolino and Aurelio Costa are assassinated by sulphur miners.

Despite the political and social differences between the characters, a large number of them are subject to feelings of alienation and self-division, and therefore also to a need for authenticity and wholeness.¹⁵ The political activities of the main characters and indeed of the 'Fasci' are seen in terms of a kind of religious impulse: "Alla chiesa avevano sostituito il Fascio; e aspettavano da questo tutti i miracoli impetrati invano da quella" (TR 731).

This theme is most fully developed in the figure of Lando Laurentano whose socialism is seen to be a part of a desire for flux and a loathing of forms - habits, words, books. His thoughts echo those of Diego Cinci in Ciascuno a suo modo almost exactly. He is an enemy "non di questo o quell'ordine, ma dell'ordine in genere, d'ogni forma determinata? Socialista era per il momento: per quel tal momento di piena, a cui anelava" (TR 731). He possesses the traits of many Pirandellian outsiders: he is very conscious of the gap between created form and life, seeing history books as a grotesque reduction of the tumultuous fullness of life to "venti righe di stampa". As elsewhere in the novel, it is the quiet voice of nature which

stimulates this awareness.

Dalle due finestre basse, che davano sul giardino, entrava il passerajo fitto, assiduo, assordante degli innumerevoli uccelletti che ogni giorno si davan convegno sul pino là, palpitante più d'ali che di foglie. Paragonava quel fremito continuo, instancabile, quell'ebro tumulto di voci vive, con le parole racchiuse in quei libri muti, e gliene cresceva lo sdegno. Composizioni artificiosi, vita fissata, rappresa in forme immutabili, costruzioni logiche, architetture mentali, induzioni, deduzioni - via! via! via! Muoversi, vivere, non pensare! (TR 727).

His awareness of the artificiality of form prevents him from being able to take life totally seriously. In his club he watches his friends and calmly imagines an explosion erupting into "tutto quel mondo fatuo, fittizio" (TR 729). He is aware too of a disjunction between his self which engages with the world and an essential self which rejects the world. His true being remains at home when he goes out, he feels, so that he never feels totally inside his acts. His sense of the factitiousness of reality is compounded by a sense of the ephemerality of human life and again it is a distanced perspective which creates this:

Si fermava un po' per sentire intorno a sé il silenzio notturno; gli pareva che questo silenzio si profundasse nel tempo, nel passato di Roma, e diventasse terribile. Un brivido lo scoteva. Gravava quella notte su una città di mille e mille anni, per cui egli passava, ombra vana, minima, che un lieve soffio avrebbe spazzata via (TR 730).

Other characters too have this yearning for flux. Flaminio Salvo discourses on his sense of self-alienation when he commands his men. They seem like puppets to him, whilst he to them is a leader and nothing more. "E di tant'altra vita, vita d'affetti e di idee che mi s'agita dentro, nessuno che abbia mai avuto il più lontano sospetto... Con chi vuoi parlarne? Sono fuori della parte che devo rappresentare..." (TR 686). His advice to Aurelio is "muoviti sempre; scrollati di tratto in tratto d'addosso ogni incrostatura di concetti;" and he then refers to Don Cosmo as a model to follow (TR 687).

Don Cosmo is the most detached character in a novel full of characters

for whom life is not real. While his brother don Ippolito is "fuori del tempo, fuori della vita..." because he is fixed in the Bourbon past, don Cosmo is the philosopher visionary who, like Lando, loathes ceremony and fantasises about destroying everything in order to start all over again:

Vi giuro che non so, in certi momenti, se sono piú pazzo io che non ci capisco nulla o quelli che credono sul serio di capirci qualche cosa e parlano e si muovono, come se avessero veramente un qualche scopo davanti a loro, il quale poi, raggiunto, non dovesse a loro stessi apparir vano. Io comincerei, signor mio, dal rompere questo bicchiere. Poi butterei giù la casa... Ricominciando daccapo, chi sa!... (TR 603-4).

His past is particularly interesting in the context of this study: he is a former monk in whom the battle between faith and reason had been carried by reason. But this had resulted in "quella nera, fredda e profonda disperazione" (TR 650). Whilst he has no time for the petty affairs of the world he still has compassion for "le illusioni incoscienti, le finzioni spontanee e necessarie dell'anima" (TR 651). Typically in this novel it is the immobility of the landscape which reinforces his sense of futility:

Guardò gli alberi, davanti alla villa: gli parvero assorti anch'essi in un sogno senza fine, da cui invano la luce del giorno, invano l'aria smuovendo loro le frondi tentassero di scuoterli. Da un pezzo ormai, nel fruscio lungo e lieve di quelle fronde egli sentiva, come da un'intima lontananza, la vanità di tutto e il tedio angoscioso della vita (TR 513). ^

The dreaminess and timelessness of nature is further elaborated in the perceptions of Dianella. Here the features already noted suggest a pantheistic presence, and Dianella's brief absence from herself results not in disillusion but reintegration and a sense of beauty:

... il silenzio attorno era così attonito, e così intenso e immemore il trasognamento della terra e di tutte le cose, che a poco a poco se ne sentì attratta e affascinata. Le parvero allora gravati da una tristezza infinita e rassegnata quegli alberi assorti nel loro sogno perenne, da cui invano il vento cercava di scuoterli. Percepì, in quella intimità misteriosa con la natura, il brulichio delle foglie, il ronzio degli insetti; e non sentì piú di vivere per sé; visse per un istante quasi incosciente con la terra, come se l'anima le si fosse diffusa e confusa in tutte le cose della campagna (TR 590).

The recurrent motif of the wind trying to shake the trees out of their

peaceful dream is an image which reinforces the theme of the futility of action. In a later moment of communion with nature, the dark mountains on the horizon seem to hold "il mistero degli evi piú remoti" while as in "Prima notte" the cricket song has the effect of drawing the mind away from human affairs: "con quel tremulo limpido assiduo canto dei grilli che, sparsi tra le erbe dei piani, pareva persuadessero all'oblio d'ogni cosa" (TR 606). Here Dianella also notes the alienation of humans from nature. But this is not the Absurd perception of the disjunction between consciousness and the non-conscious matter of existence. Rather it is that nature holds unity within it and is animated by some force: "Tra quei grilli e quegli alberi e quella luna e quei monti non era forse un concerto misterioso, a cui gli uomini restavano estranei?" (TR 606).

The ambiguity present in the experience of don Cosmo and Dianella - alienation/beauty, despair/tenderness - is repeated in the attitudes of Selmi. He combines a love of life with a disregard for it: "Questa persistente gioventú Corrado Selmi di Rosabia la doveva al vivace costante amore per la vita e, nello stesso tempo, al pochissimo peso che sempre le aveva dato....Viaggiatore senza bagaglio, soleva definirsi" (TR 633). He is yet another character who advocates flux as a philosophy of life: "Ma se la vita è una piuma, donna Caterina!... non le sembra necessario mantenere l'anima nostra in uno stato ... dirò cosí, di fusione continua?" (TR 636). This is not an other-worldly attitude though, as his subsequent suicide shows. He talks of "suo grande amore per la vita ch'egli difendeva uccidendosi" (TR 793). His despair is about what men make of the world, not about life itself. His visionary moment is not pantheistic in fact but is really a positive version of Absurd detachment from "tutte le piccole miserie acerbe che laggiú lo avevano offeso e soffocato;..." (TR 793). Instead of a sense that life is composed of "le meschine volgarità quotidiane" Selmi possesses a sense of self which subsists independently,

apart from contingent events. Contemplating Rome for the last time, on the Janiculum under a clear blue sky he experiences a moment of purity and eternity which stems from an intense awareness of being alive. His perception of futility and his refusal to take life seriously are not an escape from life but a strategy for survival, a way of protecting the spirit. It is only when political events threaten to rob him of the freedom to enjoy life that he chooses to bow out.

In this novel the destiny of Sicily is shown to be intertwined with that of individuals who are grappling with the familiar Pirandellian problems of who they are and how they should live. The visionary experiences have the dual function of underlining the futility of human endeavour and yet of bringing the characters' and the reader's attention to the unity of life which exists outside purely human concerns. Visionary perception belongs, as do despair, madness and self-division to both the 'Old' and the 'Young' alike, providing a link between generations which are apparently separated by values.

ii) The Visionary Moment and Death

The perspective of a dying person is frequently evoked in Pirandello's work. The imminence of death is seen to induce a shift in perspective. The dying character views life from a distance, in its wholeness. This is not always experienced as a visionary moment but as a sense of heightened awareness in which direct experience of the reality of this world is conveyed with the same incantatory lyricism used for mysticism and often with the same expressions - "ebbrezza divina", "delizia".

A similar double perspective to that in I vecchi e i giovani informs the novella "Il viaggio" (1910) where the tragedy of a premature death just as love has been declared is offset by a lyrical awareness of life. The visionary experience which lies at the heart of this story is the noetic.

intense kind, like Selmi's, in which heightened awareness brings a sense of knowledge and certainty, after which the character can return to the immediate situation with renewed strength because they have seen it in a broader perspective.

In "Il viaggio" the contact with the 'Beyond' is part of the overall structure of the story which concerns the dying Adriana Braggi's discovery of a number of beyonds in life. The journey of the title is not simply the one from life to death, or from Sicily to Venice. It is a passage too from ignorance, inexperience, monotony and unfulfilment to knowledge, vibrant experience and fulfilment in love, both emotional and sexual - "viaggio d'amore, senza ritorno; viaggio d'amore verso la morte" (NA II 453). This succinctly points out the double focus in this story: the progress towards death is paralleled by a discovery of this life. There is nothing illusory, surrealistic or escapist about the fulfilment and the vision here. It is tragically real and, as in other novelle, it is far from world-rejecting or nihilistic. The dying person, like the humorist, is in the privileged position of being able to see two dimensions simultaneously:

Andava in treno per la prima volta. A ogni tratto, a ogni giro di ruota, aveva l'impressione di penetrare, d'avanzarsi in un mondo ignoto, che d'improvviso le si creava nello spirito con apparenze che, per quanto le fossero vicine, pur le sembravano come lontane e le davano, insieme col piacere della loro vista, anche un senso di pena sottilissima e indefinibile: la pena che esse fossero sempre esistite oltre e fuori dell'esistenza e anche dell'immaginazione di lei; la pena d'essere tra loro estranea e di passaggio, e ch'esse senza di lei avrebbero seguitato a vivere per sé con le loro proprie vicende (NA II 446).

This double, bitter-sweet element, the mingling of joy and pain, closeness and distance (recalling don Cosmo's "intima lontananza") gives the novella an emotional doubleness quite different from the aesthetic doubleness of 'umorismo'. Adriana's birth-death is evoked by means of water images throughout the story. The journey begins in a kind of deathly immobility; Adriana living in the confinement of premature widowhood following a

loveless marriage in a small Sicilian town surrounded by arid, scorched land. The journey takes her to Palermo with its "fontana d'Ercole" and its port, across the sea to Naples, ending in Venice, the "città emergente dalle acque". Like moonlight, water often plays an important role in visionary moments, whether for its visual properties or its auditive effects (such as the distant roar of the sea in "Prima notte" and I vecchi e i giovani). It is associated with women, formlessness and rebirth.

There is also a movement towards colour and noise in the story as Adriana's awareness expands. The main visionary moment is anticipated after her illness has been confirmed as terminal. The use of light and colour here is very similar to that in some of Ionesco's accounts of his "moments de lumière":

... uscì dall'ombra della scala sulla via, nell'abbagliamento del sole al tramonto, sotto un cielo tutto fiamma che dalla parte della marina lanciava come un immenso nembo sfolgorante sul Corso lunghissimo; e vide tra le vetture entro quel baglior d'oro il brulichio della folla rumorosa, dai volti e dagli abiti accesi da riflessi purpurei, i guizzi di luce, gli sprazzi colorati, quasi di pietre preziose, delle vetrine, delle insegne, degli specchi delle botteghe; la vita, la vita, la vita soltanto si sentì irrompere in un subbuglio nell'anima per tutti i sensi commossi ed esaltati quasi per un'ebbrezza divina; ... (NA II 448).

Paradoxically, while life becomes vividly real for her, at the same time it becomes dreamy and distant; the words "sogno" and "lontano" recur. The visionary climax comes just before the end, providing a kind of moment of calm or dramatic pause, after which Pirandello speeds up the pace of the story towards the declaration of love and Adriana's death. It is both the moment when Adriana fully comprehends her destiny and where the lyricism of the writing reaches its highest point. Rather than acting as a contrast, a sudden distancing and the eruption of a new perspective into the text and the consciousness of the protagonist, this visionary moment is part of an overall rhythm in the story. The effect of this moment is achieved by a lengthy paragraph in which the main verb is delayed by a stream of

qualifying phrases:

lì, davanti a quella fontana, sotto il cobalto del cielo così intenso che quasi pareva nero attorno alla fulgida statua marmorea del semidio su l'alta colonna sorgente in mezzo all'ampia conca, chinandosi a guardare l'acqua vitrea, su cui natava qualche foglia, qualche cuora verdastra che riflettevano l'ombra sul fondo; e poi, a ogni lieve ondolio di quell'acqua, vedendo vaporare come una nebbiolina sul volto impassibile delle sfingi che guardano la conca, quasi un'ombra di pensiero si sentì anche lei passare sul volto che come un alito fresco veniva da quell'acqua; e subito a quel soffio un gran silenzio di stupore le allargò smisuratamente lo spirito; e, come se un lume d'altri cieli le si accendesse improvviso in quel vuoto incommensurabile, ella sentì d'attingere in quel punto quasi l'eternità, d'acquistare una lucida, sconfinata coscienza di tutto, dell'infinito che si nasconde nella profondità dell'anima misteriosa, e d'aver vissuto, e che le poteva bastare, perché era stata in un attimo, in quell'attimo, eterna (NA II 449).

Beside the sense of wonder, here the paradoxical sensations of tasting eternity in a moment and of a 'full emptiness' are typical of accounts of mystical experiences.¹⁶

"Da sé" (1913) opens with a section of 'style indirect libre' in which the protagonist adds up the potential cost of his own funeral, with ironic asides about the motives of his relatives in their choice of coffin materials and decorations. The black humour of this view of death from a financial perspective is suddenly transmuted into transcendental farce when the narrative voice breaks in and adds another level of absurdity by informing us "Tutto questo Matteo Sinagra avrebbe fatto risparmiare ai parenti, andando co'suoi piedi a uccidersi, economicamente, al cimitero, davanti al cancelletto della sua gentilizia" (NA II 648). The incongruity of pecuniary concerns and suicide transforms what might be tragedy into a more modern self-conscious mode typical of Absurdist writing. Whereas the death perspective of "Il viaggio" is bitter-sweet, here it gains a kind of carefree hilarity. The already double perspective of imminent death is overlaid with a humoristic doubleness.

The origin of Matteo's decision to commit suicide lies in a crisis of awareness which could have been lifted straight out of Camus' account of

the Absurd. For most of his life Matteo had been at one with himself, had found things easy and never been troubled by doubt or lack of confidence. But then:

La vita gli s'era tutt'a un tratto come votata d'ogni senso... . Tutto così, da un giorno all'altro, gli s'era cangiato, oscurato; anche l'aspetto delle cose e degli uomini. S'era trovato all'improvviso a tu per tu con un altro se stesso, ch'egli non conosceva affatto, in un altro mondo che gli si scopriva adesso per la prima volta attorno: duro, ottuso, opaco, inerte (NA II 649).

The consequence of this new awareness is bankruptcy and a paralysing sense of futility. "Inutile ogni atto, ogni passo; inutile anche parlare" (NA II 649). Although his spirit has left his former life he still clings unconsciously to the shell of his self until one day, on meeting an old friend, he realises that his very name has no meaning now and he decides to sever the last connection. But his final walk to the cemetery brings a new awareness. Having realised his emptiness and ephemerality, he regains a new existence through his pure consciousness of the world. "Ha ritrovato se stesso, è entrato nella sua qualità, d'ombra di se stesso" (NA II 651). Freed from himself and from everyday concerns, he now sees things for themselves and is filled with "un'ebbrezza divina". "E guarda con occhi nuovi le cose che non sono più per lui, che per lui non hanno più senso. Gli alberi... oh guarda! erano così gli alberi? erano questi?" (NA II 652). Here then the device of the 'living dead' protagonist is a humorous strategy, a part of that Pirandellian consciousness which combines inner and outer perspectives.

"Il coppo" (1912) provides a variation on this pattern of themes. Here, Bernardo Morasco gains an awareness of the Absurd when his wife inherits a fortune which makes the sacrificing of his life's ambition to be an artist null and void. Freed from his 'subsistence' duties he has time to reflect and look on his life from the outside. His inebriation adds comedy to his bitterness about the past. Typically, Pirandello uses man's

relationship with nature to convey the transformation of consciousness on which the novella focuses. Walking aimlessly around Rome, Bernardo becomes aware of time and ageing, of the indifference of nature to human vicissitudes and of the smallness of man against a cosmic background. Observing the ebullience of Spring around him he experiences the Absurd gulf between man and the Universe. "Che strazio, in mezzo a quel primo verde, così vivido e fresco d'infanzia, sentirsi grigi i capelli, arida la barba" (NA I 676). There follows the knowledge that given his age, he cannot leave his wife to start anew. As in "Da sé", the bitterness of the events of his life is counterbalanced by an awareness of the possibility of beauty: "Come andar più con quel corpo in cerca d'amore? Senz'amore, senz'altro bene era passata per lui la vita, che poteva, oh sí, poteva esser bella!" (NA I 678). Looking back on the quarrel which scarred his family life, he now finds it ridiculous - "Buffoni! Come in un libretto d'opera" (NA I 674). Lying back in the grass and contemplating the sky, as so many of Pirandello's characters do, Bernardo's mind, now seems to stand on the frontiers of reality: "aveva pianto, sentendosi perduto come in una lontananza infinita; e gli era parso di ricordarsi di tante cose, che forse per lui non erano mai esistite" (NA I 676). There is a tenuous suggestion of visionary experience here in which Pirandello hints at some sort of life outside this one but the idea is not developed; indeed, it is as though he is expressing and disowning the idea simultaneously, as the language verges on the nonsensical - "he seemed to remember many things which for him had never perhaps existed".

Bernardo's encounter with the image of futility, the whirling landing net, brings on a realisation that he has no role in the world and prompts a suicidal impulse which is still tempered by a sense of the comic (his unusual choice of instrument of death). This amusement becomes mad laughter when even his attempt to die is thwarted. But now, with the feeling

that the world has been challenged, peace is recovered. "E l'incanto della notte gli apparve ritrovato, con le stelle ben ferme e brillanti nel cielo, e quelle sponde e quella pace e quel silenzio" (NA I 679). There is a hint that merely to question life briefly brings reconciliation and a renewed contact with its essential reality, a notion which occurs also in Ionesco's work.¹⁷

iii) The Visionary Moment and "Umorismo"

The visionary moment may bring an abrupt change of tone and is consequently often linked to a broader humoristic pattern in a text. In "Sole e ombra" (1896) the moment of vision which Ciunna experiences is of the same kind as that in "Prima notte" but is more fully integrated into the text. The details are identical - water, moonlight, peace and cricket song. The very title is emblematic of both the content and the style of the story which is imbued with the doubleness of "umorismo". Ciunna contributes to this mood, possessing an innate "estro comico" which means that he views his own dilemma from two opposing viewpoints.

The main events of the story have certain doubleness too: Ciunna sets out to commit suicide and ends up meeting a rumbustious friend who drags him off on a day of bathing and drinking. Set against the friend's playfulness and racy conversation are Ciunna's various attempts to do away with himself. His reason for killing himself is ambiguous too: it is to protect himself from public disgrace. With his second attempt, the writing leaps from lively dialogue to comic description, as he slips and slithers over the rocks before screwing his face up ready to leap into the sea, and then to lyrical evocation of the stupendous sunset which deters him yet again by throwing the triviality of his crime into perspective:

Il sole tramontava. Il mare, d'un verde vitreo presso la riva,
s'indorava intensamente in tutta la vastità tremula dell'orizzonte.
Il cielo era tutto in fiamme, e l'impidissima l'aria, nella viva

luce, su tutto quel tremulío d'acque incendiate.

- Io là? - domandò il Ciunna poco dopo, guardando il mare, oltre gli ultimi scogli. - Per duemila e settecento lire? (NA I 460).

He resolves to go home with "un chilo de triglie grosse così" and enjoy himself.

The moment of calm comes after he has swallowed poison, his inebriation having given way to tiredness and despair. Waiting to die, he pokes his head out of the carriage window:

- Ora muojo.

L'ampia vallata sottoposta era allagata da un fresco e lieve chiarore lunare; gli alti colli di fronte sorgevano neri e si disegnavano nettamente nel cielo opalino.

Allo spettacolo di quella deliziosa quiete lunare una grande calma gli si fece dentro. Appoggiò la mano allo sportello, piegò il mento sulla mano e attese, guardando fuori.

Saliva dal basso della valle un limpido assiduo scampanellare di grilli, che pareva la voce del tremulo riflesso lunare sulle acque correnti d'un placido fiume invisibile (NA I 463).

The idea of the cricket song being the voice of the moon's shimmering reflection suggests the harmony of nature while the word 'invisibile' hints at a mysterious hidden presence. The narrator returns to the moon as he shifts from the action inside the carriage to the exterior image; the dots underline the earlier hint. "Silenzio. Una voce. Chi cantava? E quella luna..." (NA I 463). The story ends on a double, chiaroscuro image: Ciunna writhing inside the black carriage, "sotto l'enorme, nera, orrida imminenza irreparabile", while outside in the white moonlight the driver sings monotonously.

"L'Avemaria di Bobbio" (1912) offers a variation of this pattern. The same moment of mysterious calm is set in a comic narrative but here the moment itself is the focus of attention and stands at the still centre of a clash of incongruous perspectives: the powers of Montaigne, Schopenhauer and St. Augustine are brought to bear on the capricious toothache of the

corpulent and sceptical lawyer Bobbio. The description of the moment contrasts with both sides of this humoristic clash which consequently becomes a term in a second contrast between the earthly and the spiritual. Following the account of Bobbio's behaviour in the throes of toothache "un molino a vapore, strepitoso, rombante" and his "molti e molti libri d'antica e nuova filosofia" comes the suspended, ineffable calm:

E, all'improvviso, un silenzio, un gran silenzio gli s'era fatto dentro; e, anche fuori, un gran silenzio misterioso, come di tutto il mondo: un silenzio pieno di freschezza, arcanamente lieve e dolce (NA I 467).

But this is shown to be irrational and beyond human control. Pirandello is mocking here not the moment itself but the human attempt to make the irrational (be it toothache or an intense spiritual experience) part of a religious or philosophical system.

iv) "Ciàula scopre la Luna"

The visionary moment in "Ciàula scopre la Luna" (1912) is an epiphany which forms the climax of the story. The moment has an important ambiguity. On the one hand the "deliziosa chiarezza d'argento" of the full moon is a manifestation of some kind of absolute, "la Luna", and is clearly representative of something other-worldly. And yet this is not some transcendental abstract for, as the title indicates, it is not so much a question of the Divine revealing itself as of a discovery or the attainment of a direct contact with reality. For Ciàula, the moon passes from the status of word or concept to that of experience. "Sì, egli sapeva, sapeva che cos'era; ma come tante cose si sanno, a cui non si è dato mai importanza" (NA I 1278). Behind this experience lies the modern view of language and the nature of human perception. We live detached from the fullness of reality in a self-sufficient word-shaped mental world. Experience of reality is thereby mediated and palliated. The vivid moment when the

screen of mediating concepts is broken through and reality is experienced in its fullness for the first time is also referred to in Non si sa come.¹⁸

The full moon then is a symbol both of the 'other' reality beyond the earthly world and of a purely earthly wholeness. The status of the moon provides the key to the change of consciousness which the novella evokes. Critics have noted that Ciàula's climb from the dark belly (Pirandello repeats the word "ventre") of the earth is presented as a birth and that Ciàula, at first a mute creature producing only animal noises, gains the power of speech when he sees the moon. However the precise significance of this birth is illuminated by what has already been discussed with regard to the role of the visionary moment in Pirandello's work: namely, that it is not an escape from earthly existence but can act as a way of renewing it. The features of Ciàula emphasised by Pirandello early in the story are his wordless oneness with the earth and with darkness, and the fact that it is his only reality. He has no life outside his work underground and is mocked by his workmates. The birth involved is the birth of the Pirandellian human consciousness which embraces two dimensions or two viewpoints at once. Ciàula finds himself and "gran conforto" and "grande dolcezza" by going beyond his former limits, beyond his initial perception. This is suggested not only by the 'event' of seeing something for the first time but by the way his load falls off his shoulders and he sits down on it "Estatico". He discovers the reality of this world and of himself by perceiving another reality. Wholeness and awareness are achieved through a double perspective. Ciàula's moon dwarfs him and the earth; indeed its 'separateness' from the earth is emphasised, not, as elsewhere, its unity with nature or with the mysterious forces at work in the universe. But this indifference is not annihilating, rather it brings plenitude and "stupore":

... la Luna, col suo ampio velo di luce, ignara dei monti, dei

piani, delle valli che rischiaravano, ignara di lui, che pure per lei non aveva più paura, né si sentiva più stanco, nella notte ora piena del suo stupore (NA I 1278).

v) "Quand'ero matto ..."

In "Quand'ero matto ..." (1901) the centrality of mysticism to Pirandello's art and mythology is most evident. Visible here are the roots of his use of the figures of the madman, the beggar and the "dimissionario", and the links which for Pirandello exist between the concepts of identity, madness, mysticism and "umorismo". I am concerned here only to outline these links as their ultimate significance will be dealt with in a later chapter.

The story displays humoristic features, containing serious reflections within an almost Boccaccesque narrative of death, adultery and swindling. It is told, typically, with great brio in a conversational tone, and addressed to the reader. The nature of the visionary moment is intricately linked to the style of writing because it gives rise to the ethic of equality and compassion which lies at the heart of "umorismo".

The crisis in the story is initiated by an explicitly religious mystical experience in which the 'Beyond' is seen as numinous and defined as "Essere", a kind of pantheistic presence or spirit immanent in creation. It features too the loss of the individual self and the union of the spirit with the essence of 'things'. From this union comes a joyous consciousness of the Oneness and equality of all life:

... mi pareva che l'aria tra me e le cose intorno divenisse a mano a mano più intima; e che io vedessi oltre la vista naturale. L'anima, intenta e affascinata da quella sacra intimità con le cose, discendeva al limite dei sensi e percepiva ogni più lieve moto, ogni più lieve rumore. E un gran silenzio attonito era dentro di me, sicché un frullo d'ali vicino mi faceva sussultare e un trillo lontano mi dava quasi un singulto di gioja, perché mi sentivo felice per gli uccelletti che in quella stagione non pativano il freddo e trovavano per la campagna da cibarsi in abbondanza; felice, come se il mio alito li scaldasse e io li cibassi di me.

Penetravo anche nella vita d'ogni cosa, finché mi pareva di divenir quasi il mondo, che gli alberi fossero mie membra, la terra fosse il mio corpo, e i fiumi le mie vene, e l'aria la mia anima; e andavo un tratto così, estatico e compenetrato in questa divina visione (NA II 163-4).

For a while he is out of himself but when he returns to his "coscienza", he brings the rest of the world back with him: "ci rientravo, non per veder me, ma per veder gli altri in me com'essi si vedevano, per sentirli in me com'essi in loro si sentivano e volerli com'essi si volevano" (NA II 164). The mystical experience is prolonged in this manner, but here begins his madness which is seen as a state in which he is aware of all realities around him at once.

From the beginning of the story to be sane - "savio" - is explained as involving putting oneself first and shutting out the realities of others. The "Io" is "la base della vera saggezza" (NA II 161). But such behaviour is quite unreasonable to the person who holds all realities equal to his own, "e per tal mezzo anche l'Essere nella sua unità" (NA II 164). Fausto's madness consists in living selflessly, in contact with all life. "Quand'ero matto, non mi sentivo in me stesso; che è come dire: non stavo di casa in me. Ero infatti divenuto un albergo aperto a tutti.... Mi concepivo insomma in società di mutuo soccorso con l'universo;..." (NA II 161). Madness then is what results when the anthropocentric view of the universe is transcended. Fausto points out his spiritual affinity with his mother-in-law who believed that flowers represented the earth's smile of gratitude to the sun and that they did not exist for humans to pick and throw over their dead. Madness is explicitly associated with a religious view of life here - St. Francis, author of "I Fioretti", is referred to several times: a saint is someone who is conscious of the unity and equality of life.

In his state of madness Fausto writes a treatise, "Fondamento della

Morale", in part of which he berates his first wife for her callous treatment of a shy youth, and expounds the necessity of an awareness of other people's realities. The example anticipates that of the grotesquely made-up old lady of L'umorismo:

Se la sofferenza di questo giovine, o Mirina, non rimanesse per te allo stato di segno apparente che ti fa ridere, se tu non avessi soltanto coscienza del tuo triste piacere, ma anche, nello stesso tempo, del dolore di lui, non ti par chiaro che cesseresti di farlo soffrire, perché il piacere ti sarebbe turbato e distrutto dalla coscienza dell'altrui dolore? (NA II 162).

From this he passes on to prove the existence of God. The person who treated everyone equally "e alle altre coscienze attribuisse l'identica realtà che alla propria, avrebbe per necessità l'idea d'una realtà comune a tutti, d'una verità e anche di un'esistenza che ci sorpassa: Dio" (NA II 163).¹⁹ The idea that a common human reality somehow constitutes the eternal or divine in man is also to be found in Ionéco's work.²⁰

The visionary moment may serve as a dramatic pause in the action of a novella, or novel. It may provide one element in a clash of ideas, it may mark the culmination of a psychological process or coincide with the climax of a whole story. In "Quand'ero matto ..." however, it is a key element in the plot because it results in the transformation of consciousness which is the source of the events. The character is obliged to act on the new awareness and so life-style and behaviour are radically altered. The visionary moment here has a similar function to the "strappo nel cielo di carta" of the puppet theatre which tells Orestes of the factitiousness of his world.

vi) Visionary 'writing'

In "Canta l'Epistola" (1911) there is no account of a visionary moment but Tommaso Unzio's new awareness is a mystical one and as in "Quand'ero matto ..." is the cause of subsequent events. It is explicitly a religious

awareness, for Tommaso has lost his religious faith not because of "la violenza di appetiti terreni, ma sete d'anima che non riesca piú a saziarsi nel calice dell'altare e nel fonte dell'acqua benedetta,..." (NA I 445). Instead of an account of a visionary moment there is an evocation of Tommaso's new mode of perception. The prose mimics the rhythm and disjointed inconsequentiality of his thoughts – though 'thought' may be too strong a word. It is more that in places the writing follows his 'look' and expresses something which he is not even verbalising in his mind. So the sentences become longer and more loosely constructed: the verbs are subjectless infinitives which match Tommaso's rejection of a civic self in the face of the unity of all life. As in descriptions of visionary moments already quoted, the writing tends to be overqualified with the result that it develops a vague rhythm through the repetition of words like "come" or "né ... né ...":

Non aver piú coscienza d'essere, come una pietra, come una pianta; non ricordarsi piú neanche del proprio nome; vivere per vivere, senza saper di vivere, come le bestie, come le piante; senza piú affetti, né desiderii, né memorie, né pensieri; senza piú nulla che desse senso e valore alla propria vita (NA I 446).

Rather than being dynamic and referential (i.e. carrying the story forward) the writing becomes contemplative and musical.²¹ An essential feature of this lyrical writing is the use of the landscape which has both^A thematic as well as a rhapsodic function. It serves as a symbol of the 'other' life perceived by the character but also it allows the author to evoke the latter's vision instead of describing it in terms of psychological processes.

Ma davanti all'ampio spettacolo della natura, a quell'immenso piano verde di querci e d'ulivi e di castagni, degradante dalle falde del Cimino fino alla valle tiberina laggiú laggiú, sentiva a poco a poco rasserenarsi in una blanda smemorata mestizia.... Quasi vicende di nuvole gli apparivano nell'eternità della natura i singoli fatti degli uomini. Bastava guardare quegli alti monti di là dalla valle tiberina, lontani lontani, sfumanti all'orizz^onte, lievi e quasi aerei nel tramonto (NA I 447).

In its musicality and its focus on the intimate encounters between consciousness and the external world, this writing reveals a Proustian aspect to Pirandello's art. As in Proust this vein of writing is also associated with memory, nostalgia and day-dream but Pirandello uses it to suggest the spiritual, the indefinable "sentimento che spirava dalle cose".

This vein of writing finds its most suggestive and fitting context in "Di sera, un geranio" (1934) which evokes the separation of the soul from the body after death and its subsequent dissolution. Here the relationship between consciousness and the outside world alone constitutes the very stuff and point of the story and this accounts for the fact that it is the shortest in Pirandello's oeuvre. The process which the story follows is prefigured in "Cinci" where the boy experiences a moment of disembodied unity with the objects he sees: "La [la luna] vede e non la vede; come le cose che gli vagano nella mente e l'una si cangia nell'altra e tutte l'allontanano sempre piú dal suo corpo lí seduto inerte, tanto che non se lo sente piú;... è nelle cose che vede e non vede..." (NA II 810). The process of dying in "Di sera, un geranio" is an extension of this experience and it is imbued with the ambivalent value of form which is one of the hallmarks of Pirandello's vision of human nature: the dying man feels "questo sgomento del suo disgregarsi e diffondersi in ogni cosa" (NA II 814), and yet simultaneously recognises the illusory nature of what he took for real when alive. A poignant sense of the sweetness of sensual experience and of the beauty of earthly things exists alongside an awareness of their ephemerality. When alive the man always felt alienated from his body but now that he is being separated from it in death he clings on to the sensations which it brought him.

The remarkable feature of this story is the manner in which the writing 'imitates' the subject matter. The prose has a dying fall which matches the dissolution of the soul. The loosening of the syntax found in

"Canta l'Epistola" is pushed to an extreme here: sentences lack subjects or verbs and create a sense of dreamy disembodied ethereality. At the end the language almost rarefies into nonsense so that it loses its referentiality and approaches the condition of music:

Ma ora lui è come la fragranza di un'erba che si va sciogliendo in questo respiro, vapore ancora sensibile che si dirada e vanisce, ma senza finire, senz'aver più nulla vicino; sì, forse un dolore; ma se può far tanto ancora di pensarlo, è già lontano, senza più tempo, nella tristezza infinita d'una così vana eternità.

Una cosa, consistere ancora in una cosa, che sia pur quasi niente, una pietra. O anche un fiore che duri poco: ecco, questo geranio... (NA II 815).

The use of infinitives and the loss of grammatical completeness increases with the disappearance of the man's self-consciousness. The story begins in a kind of "style indirect libre" but as he dissolves into things so the writing follows his consciousness and moves from object to object with it - his body, the room, the garden. So the prose vacillates between the earthly solidity of natural objects ("La vasca, grezza, è attaccata al muro di cinta. Il muro è tutto vestito di verde dalle roselline rampicanti") and incorporeality. Dying here means to see things no longer through the lens of self but as they are for themselves, so much of the story is description in the phenomenological manner of the French "nouveau roman".

We find here the familiar Pirandellian 'visionary' emblems: the moon, water and, as in "Il viaggio", leaves floating on water, an image which here matches the floating state of the soul ("galleggiante"). The trance-like mood of the writing is also created by the repetition of certain words: verde, vasca, acqua, esile, fragranza, eternità, vano, svanire, vanisce - some repeated near each other, others consistently throughout the story. Conjunctions are also repeated for rhythmic effect - ma, e, non, invece, senza.

This can be seen to constitute the zenith of this vein of Pirandello's writing and of his preoccupation with the other-worldly. Here is an

attempt to express visionary insight in its direct immediacy. Whereas "Quand'ero matto ..." and "La carriola" involve a first person retrospective account, and other novelle address accounts to the reader ("La mano del malato povero"), here there is an attempt to draw the reader into the very texture of the experience. The short novella in "style indirect libre" combined with an omniscient, invisible narrator presenting the objects within someone's consciousness in a phenomenological style provides the ideal form for this subjective yet selfless, random experience. Pirandello here emerges as a poet of inwardness and of the minute processes of consciousness.

III The Role of Mysticism in some of the Plays

As my comments on "Di sera, un geranio" suggest, visionary experience is not the stuff of drama: it is intensely 'inward', solitary, momentary and ineffable. Nevertheless it does play a variety of roles in Pirandello's drama.

1) Mysticism as "antefatto" and character trait

As in some novelle the visionary moment is sometimes referred to briefly rather than being integral to the plot or a source of events. Indeed, it can be significant precisely because it has no place at all in the world of the play, as is the case in Vestire gli ignudi. This play presents many levels of chaos, misunderstanding and deception. There is the sordid "antefatto" concerning lust and betrayal in Smyrna which is revealed only gradually as it is obfuscated by Ersilia's desire to create a 'dress' to cover up her past. Consequently the journalist has one idea of the "antefatto" while Ludovico, the writer, constructs another interpretation. A further clash of levels is provided by Ludovico's 'theoretical' interest in Ersilia's past and her experience of it as 'raw', lived life: "Ma pensi che quello che lei suppose d'una immagine della sua mente, io lo sofferesi nelle mie carni vive, che subirono l'onta, il ribrezzo!" (MN I 885). The two men in Ersilia's life also reveal disorder beneath the smooth surface of narrated facts. The relationship between intention and action is not as simple as might appear: Franco talks of his self-deception and Grotti of his feelings of self-alienation and of how he only thought of work "per colmare il vuoto che sentivo nella mia vita" (MN I 894). Over and above this level of disorder, there is another one created by the relativity of perception, that is, the characters constantly misinterpret each other's actions. Reality, then, in this play is neither

logical nor linear: "i fatti sono come si assumono; e allora, nello spirito, non sono piú fatti: ma vita che appare, cosí o in altro modo" (MN I 909).

All of this fluid, random chaos is symbolised in the play by the noise of the street outside Ludovico's window: the busy, muddy market-place where an old man may suddenly be squashed to death by the traffic. Ludovico underlines its meaning: "Ma la strada c'è, con la gente che vi passa, i rumori della vita; la vita degli altri, estranea ma presente, che frastorna, interrompe, intralcia, contraria, deforma..." (MN I 854). While Ludovico's retreat from reality is his art, Franco's is his life on the sea: "Ho lasciato il mare, il mare, per affogare cosí, qua, nel pantano della vita ordinaria" (MN I 880). The visionary moment is discussed by the two men as a source of authenticity and purity, a state of mind free from pettiness, banality and doubt:

Ludovico: ... Ma perché in certi momenti, caro signore, l'anima si libera di tutte le miserie comuni.

Franco: Ecco, sissignore!

Ludovico: Balza su dai piccoli ostacoli dell'esistenza quotidiana; e non ne avverte piú i minuti bisogni e si scrolla d'addosso cure meschine e mediocri doveri.

Franco: Benissimo! E cosí sciolta, cosí libera, respira, palpita in un'aria fervida, infiammata, ove anche le cose piú difficili, le dicevo, diventano facilissime.

Ludovico: E tutto è fluido e agevole, come in un'ebbrezza divina. Sì. Ma sono momenti, caro signore! (MN I 881).

Ludovico goes on to suggest that in these moments the soul ("anima") is liberated from self-consciousness and reason - "sciolta d'ogni freno, destituita d'ogni riflessione, accesa, abbagliata in quella fiamma di sogno." He insists that the moment must only be brief and that it should not be prolonged; it is not of the same order as ordinary reality.

Memmo Speranza of Ma non è una cosa seria stresses the same qualities in his account of the visionary moment. He echoes closely "Il viaggio":

the "luce d'altri cieli" paradoxically results in an intensified sense of earthly life by giving an insight into the mystery of the soul. Eternity is tasted in a moment:

... non abbiamo forse sentito tutti, in certi momenti, aprirsi, accendersi dentro di noi come una luce d'altri cieli, che ci permette di vedere nelle più misteriose profondità dell'animo, e che ci dà la gioia infinita di sentirci in un attimo... in quell'attimo - eterni - e che s'è vissuto - e che può bastare? (MN II 528).

Like Ludovico, he stresses the uniqueness and necessary spontaneity of the moment -

... quest'eternità ... l'unica consentita all'uomo: chiusa e vissuto veramente in un solo momento, che non può più ripetersi, che non può esser più quello; ma fastidio, stanchezza, nausea, prigionia insopportabile, a volerlo perpetuare! (MN II 528).

The visionary moment here is indirectly linked to the idea of 'seriousness' in the play: it exists as something which has a 'given' meaning; its importance is not in doubt. Human affairs, on the contrary, have as much importance as humans want to give them: "Cose serie, del resto, si persuada, signor Barranco, sono quelle sole a cui diamo importanza! C'è più della morte? Uno non le dà importanza: - cosa da nulla!" (MN II 532).

The visionary moment is perhaps more important here for the role it plays in the characterisation of Memmo. Flippant and 'don Juanesque' on the surface, he has traits which relate him to Pirandello's intellectual heroes, Leone Gala of Il giuoco delle parti and Baldovino of Il piacere dell'onestà. The visionary moment labels him as the character who has understood the game of life and sets him apart from the other characters who take 'forms' (such as the institution of marriage) seriously and find the idea of marrying in order not to marry repulsive. Memmo has understood that meaning is constructed, not given, and it is this idea that permits him to conceive the ruse of the 'formal marriage'. His sense of the factitiousness and relativity of human forms has been deepened by his recent brush with death but he also has a temperament which is impulsive

and voluble ("accensibile", "inflammabile" – qualities echoing the "accendersi" of the visionary moment). He lives at home with flux and instinct, outside forms: as soon as he becomes engaged to a girl, he falls out of love.

In Il piacere dell'onestà visionary awareness is again used to characterise the central character, Baldovino, and to distinguish the person who is aware of the true nature of human reality as a fabrication and of social form as a masquerade. His citing of Descartes' perception, that if dreams had regularity we would not know dream from waking reality, marks him as understanding that the human sense of reality is constituted by habit. Baldovino, like Memmo, knows how to manipulate and play with 'forms'. There is no visionary moment narrated in this play but it is suggested indirectly by Maurizio before Baldovino even makes his first appearance, and it forms part of Maurizio's portrait of him. He is described as living "fuori d'ogni regola" and as possessing "una sincerità spaventosa". He is explicitly associated with insight into 'other' dimensions:

T'assicuro che è stata per me una nottata fantastica, tra lo sprazzare d'una miriade di lucciole per quel viale: accanto a quell'uomo che parlava con una sincerità spaventosa; e, come quelle lucciole innanzi agli occhi, ti faceva guizzare innanzi alla mente certi pensieri inattesi dalle più oscure profondità dell'anima. Mi pareva, non so, di non esser più sulla terra, ma in una contrada di sogno, strana, lugubre, misteriosa, ov'egli s'aggirava da padrone, ove le cose più bizzarre, più inverosimili potevano avvenire e sembrar naturali e consuete (MN I 593-4).

The dignity and insight of Baldovino contrasts with the hysterical flailing of the other characters (apart from Agata) who seek to cover up disturbing realities about human behaviour. Baldovino seeks to dissociate himself from social pretence by making pretence and constructions conscious: "Fingere, sarebbe orribile, oltre che laido, volgarissimo" (MN I 601). He is in search of purity and authenticity. But the play shows this desire to be a kind of absolutism and ultimately an impossible stance to keep up if

you live in society. Pretence is a necessary ingredient of civic living and so Baldovino's role as a "pura forma astratta" (MN I 613), a husband in name only, proves to be unactable. He is drawn into emotional engagement in spite of himself.

The overall pattern into which the trait of visionary awareness fits is very similar to that in Ma non è una cosa seria. While Baldovino attempted purity through intellectual abstraction, Memmo seeks it through immersing himself in physical involvement and keeping social niceties (marriage) out of the way. But like Baldovino, he is eventually forced to live with two 'modes' simultaneously: he falls in love with the girl who is already his wife. So here visionary awareness is used as part of an exploration of the possibility of opting out of aspects of social living. The theme is in fact more central to Il piacere dell'onestà where the way of life attempted by Baldovino is far more audacious and outlandish than Memmo's. Baldovino's intellectuality is stressed. In Ma non è una cosa seria the theme of opting out is hidden by the element of Romantic comedy. Memmo is less of a world-weary "dimissionario" than a selfish amoralist who wants to be able to do as he pleases.

11) Diana e la Tuda

The title Diana e la Tuda announces a 'schematic' conflict which is reinforced by the black and white colours of the set when the curtain rises. The play has been seen as the product of Tilgher's simplistic interpretation of Pirandello's art as being founded on the conflict between Life which has movement and Form which is fixed.²² Pirandello consequently created 'abstract' characters which represent these two forces: Sirio Dossi the artist 'fixes' the spontaneous life of Tuda in the static form of a statue. On one level then, the play can be seen as an allegory. And yet from the first, critics detected a blurred focus in the play.²³ While the

Expressionistic set suggests the play of hidden forces, the action itself tends to become stuck on the petty jealousy of Tuda and Sara. But a far more disorienting feature is the very character of Giuncano, whom some critics found more interesting than the clash between Sirio and Tuda. R. Sogliuzzo indeed goes so far as to claim "The real protagonist of Diana e la Tuda is Giuncano".²⁴ I would like to suggest that this is so because of his visionary awareness.

In the first scene we are told that Giuncano has experienced some kind of revolution in consciousness which led him to destroy all his statues and give up sculpture. Since then he has described himself as 'mad'. His madness is not the spontaneous "ebbrezza abbarbagliante" of Fausto Bandini in "Quand'ero matto ..." but the 'literary' madness of being aware of the constructed nature of human reality and of the existence of other realities beyond it: "Perché ora vedo! Da che sono impazzito come tu dici. Sapessi quante cose che prima non vedevo" (MN I 380). He no longer sees things from a man-centred perspective but as they are for themselves. In the first scene he is still dazzled by what he had seen earlier in the day:

- Questa mattina - ah, li ho qua ancora, come una vampa negli occhi
- su ai Parioli - tutti quei papaveri - la gioja - (...) - non la volevano dare a nessuno - (chi li vedeva lassù?) - l'avevano, l'avevano per sé, la gioja d'avvampare al sole, così in tanti insieme - e il silenzio, su quel loro rosso scarlatto, pareva stupore - stupore (MN I 380).

But his visionary awareness has not brought him peace of mind, rather he is haunted by his awareness of other realities existing beyond his perception, realities which would bring renewal if only he could reach them:

(con altro tono) Quando io sento parlare, quando io guardo e vado per qualche luogo; nelle parole che sento, in ciò che vedo, nel silenzio delle cose, ho sempre un sospetto che ci possa essere qualcosa di ignoto a me, a cui il mio spirito, pur lì presente, rischia di rimanere estraneo; e sto con l'ansia che, se ci potessi entrare, forse la mia vita s'aprirebbe a sensazioni nuove, tanto da parermi di vivere in un altro mondo. Questo qui, invece... io non so: è così: coi paraocchi: non sente, non vede nulla: vuole una cosa sola (MN I 394).

In other words he has a sense of human existence as a Fallen state, a sense he expresses using the Pirandellian metaphor of the trap which imprisons life: "Presi in trappola - io - tu - tutti quanti! - ". The objects which he sees around him "portano tutta la pena d'essere come sono, e di non potere piú essere altrimenti" (MN I 422). This horror of rigid forms is exacerbated by Giuncano's age and the fact that his body, as it ages, is taking on the appearance of the body of the father whom he hated. This, he feels, gives him an identity in other people's eyes which he feels has nothing to do with him or the person he feels himself to be inside. The stage directions tell us that he has "viso macerato ma occhi giovanissimi, acuti." He possesses the self-alienation of many Pirandellian tortured heroes: "non mi ci sono mai riconosciuto", he says of his body (MN I 420).²⁵ This gives him a poisoning sense of inauthenticity.

His visionary experience has left Giuncano even more at odds with life. It is his restlessness, his loss of equilibrium which makes him more interesting than Tuda and Sirio. He is caught between his horror of forms, of cold marble statues, of his ageing body and a wholly earthly desire to be young and to love. This torn awareness contrasts with Sirio Dossi's single-minded absolutism. Dossi is the familiar Pirandellian rebel, sharing the loathing of 'il solito' of some of Pirandello's mystics. His project to create the ultimate statue and then to commit suicide is none other than a manifestation of the desire for unity. He will achieve it by fixing the life of Tuda in a statue: "oggi non piú quella di ieri, domani non piú questa d'oggi: ogni attimo un'altra: tante! Io la faccio una: quella (indica di là, la statua) per sempre!" (MN I 388). It is significant that the impulse for this is born in Dossi's mind as he contemplates the chaotic fragments of Giuncano's work (symbolising the latter's Absurd crisis) alongside the reactions of the onlookers: "quelle statue infrante, tra i piedacci della gente accorsa - e quelle facce sguajate, quei corpi

scomposti da prendere a calci e abbattere ah, quelli sí - a martellare..." (MN I 382). Sirio's chosen solution is a retreat from formlessness and multiplicity; Giuncano seeks to embrace them.

In this play then, the visionary awareness provides dramatic tension in that it leads to a torn consciousness. It is not directly portrayed as a "moment" but it is a vital "antefatto" which informs the whole play and provides some semi-lyrical interludes and a hint of the 'Beyond' which contrasts with the sexual rivalry and bickering of the models. Again the awareness is used in the portrayal of a character who has opted out of a certain style of living.

iii) Non si sa come

In Non si sa come the expanded awareness of Giuncano becomes, in the figure of Romeo Daddi, the central focus of the play. The "antefatto" and the cause of the new awareness is an encounter with the irrational in the form of an unpremeditated act of adultery. Contact with the wife of another person is the first step along the path towards 'other' realities.²⁶ The problem of illicit and unwilled desire is a recurrent theme in Pirandello's work and is associated with a variety of other themes: the extent of man's control over his acts and the human inability to face certain realities and the concomitant need to mask them. Here however, the explosion of the irrational causes an expansion of consciousness which results in a mystical perception. Romeo Daddi becomes aware of all the "other" realities which human consciousness normally does not see: the random fluid processes of the mind itself and a life of some kind beyond death: "Oltre la vita umana, costruita da noi, c'è il mondo, il mistero eterno del mondo;..." (MN II 882). (The words "mistero" and "misterioso" recur in the play.) The contrast between "pazzo" and "savio" found in "Quand'ero matto ..." returns here, with Romeo refusing the label of madman

and claiming visionary status: "Vorrei sapere chi ha detto che sono pazzo. Io no di certo. Io penso ora così, perché vedo: vedo.... Ciò che normalmente, quelli che sono savii, non fanno o non vogliono vedere." (MN II 836).

More than the encounter with the irrational within himself, what has truly disturbed Romeo is the way Ginevra has managed to bury the deed in her consciousness and carry on as normal, as though nothing had happened. Romeo has come to see human consciousness as a constructor of reality and as containing only partial, provisional realities subject to sudden change and destruction by "la volubilità della vita":

E quando credi d'esserti fatta una coscienza e hai stabilito che ogni cosa è così o così, ci vuol così poco a farti riconoscere che questa tua coscienza era fondata su nulla, perché le cose, quelle che tu credi più certe, possono essere altre da quelle che credi; basta farti sapere una cosa, il tuo animo cangia d'un tratto, addio coscienza, diventa subito un'altra, e hai un bel tenerti fermo a tutte le tue certezze di prima; dove sono? (MN II 838).

In the light of this, human knowledge becomes something which restricts rather than liberates because it keeps men within the factitious and fictitious world of consciousness: "È una continua ubriacatura" (MN II 881). We find here the familiar visionary sense of the smallness of men and the human world in comparison with the realities glimpsed beyond the familiar one: "quel che c'è in noi d'umano e che sappiamo, Bice, è veramente il meno" (MN II 876).

This view of consciousness naturally leads Romeo to speculate that reality lies not just beyond the constructed forms of consciousness but beyond human existence itself and that death will be a liberation. The expression recalls "Di sera, un geranio.":

Io credo che quando ci saremo liberati della vita, forse la più grande sorpresa che ci aspetterà sarà quella delle cose che non c'erano, che ci pareva ci fossero e non c'erano: suoni, colori; e tutto ciò che vi sentimmo, e tutto ciò che vi pensammo, e ce n'affliggemmo tanto o ne gioimmo tanto: tutto era niente; e la morte, questo niente della vita, come c'era apparsa; lo spegnersi di questo lume illusorio, caldo, sonoro e colorato, per migrare

forse verso altre misteriose illusioni (MN II 838).

Romeo's vision of illusion, instability and fragmentation focuses on the notion of "coscienza" itself, which now seems an empty word to him. He sees his fellows thinking they live in a stable, unified reality whilst they are unknowingly experiencing the world on many levels. Romeo is obsessed and fascinated by the workings of the mind which have just become apparent to him:

... si vive così poco nella così detta coscienza - ... continuamente rapiti fuori di noi da tutto il vago delle nostre impressioni, ebbrezze di sole in primavera, stupore di arcani silenzi, spettacoli di cielo, di mare, e le rondini, anche dentro di noi, di pensieri guizzanti, gli sbalzi a volo da un ricordo all'altro, al minimo richiamo fuggevole d'una sensazione (MN II 837-8).

The visionary moment for Romeo is not an intuition of the world beyond death so much as the world beyond the constructions of consciousness. It is the moment when something passes from being an abstract concept to being experienced fully and directly in its essential reality. After such a glimpse the normal reality of "cose stabilite" has no importance:

Tutti sanno che in cielo c'è la luna; e che sulla terra ci sono i boschi. Crediamo, almeno, di saperlo. Ma poi tutt'a un tratto ci accorgiamo di non averlo mai saputo veramente, quando ne abbiamo un sentimento vero, così raro, che ce ne crea d'improvviso, misteriosamente, la realtà; e la scopriamo allora, la luna, il bosco, la luna che è "quella", ora sì, "il bosco", quello! che non han più nulla da vedere con la luna e col bosco degli altri, come comunemente si sa che ci sono, l'una in cielo e l'altro in questa o in quella parte della terra. Ah, eccola, è questa la Luna! Se ne ha una volta sola il sentimento vero. E tanti non lo hanno mai, e vivono delle cose che si sanno, senza nessuna vera realtà per loro (MN II 869).

Like other Pirandellian visionaries, Romeo emphasises that the glimpse of "la vera vita" can only happen once. But unlike Ginevra, he has been unable to detach himself from the revealed reality and return to his former life. He is therefore torn between two orders of reality and it is his constant vacillating and his attempts to resolve the conflict which provide much of the tension in the play. Despite his awareness of the 'Beyond', he still has an acute sense of the exigencies of civic, human reality and it

is the two orders of knowledge which clash in him: "Le leggi morali: non so se per te ci siano; pare che non ci siano; ma per me ci sono; io sto soffrendo per questo;..." (MN II 881). He reasons himself into a double trap. In order to be innocent of murder and adultery (as he feels himself to be) he has to be able to believe that such things can happen to anyone, but if that is the case then he must see his wife's limpidity and purity as potentially corruptible and that idea is intolerable to him. If he assumes his guilt, however, he must be punished in some way and this he sees as consisting in the sacrifice of the ability to believe in "cose stabilite" – an ability which his crime destroyed. His punishment will be to live beyond the boundaries of society with an awareness of the existence of an absolute beyond life itself. He will be condemned to carry on living a life in which he can no longer believe:

La mia condanna dev'essere il contrario della carcere: fuori, fuori, dove non c'è più niente di stabilito, di solido, case, relazioni, contatti, consorzio, leggi, abitudini; più nulla: la libertà, ecco, la libertà come condanna, l'esilio nel sogno, come il santo nel deserto, o l'inferno del vagabondo che ruba, che uccide ... (MN II 877).

Participation is dependent on belief in the constructions of "coscienza" as absolutes – "la vita è a patto di credere, non di sapere" (MN II 836) – and Daddi can no longer do this.

As well as Daddi's personal drama with himself, there is the conflict between him and his friends who still inhabit the constructed world with its norms and habits. This is not a conflict of ideas or actions but of types or perceptions of reality, and as such is a drama of incomprehension and frustration. The characters are separated by an immense gulf of awareness. Respi, Giorgio and Bice are still living in the world of "uomini d'onore". The juxtaposition of two perceptions of reality, of knowledge ("cose stabilite") and the irrational, is made manifest in the contrast between Romeo and Giorgio. The latter is a kind of ironic

Ulysses: the marine officer, the man of modern science returns home from his travels not to a faithful Penelope but to Ginevra, the apparently faithful wife who has experienced something which undermines her husband's basic assumptions about life. The juxtaposition is made clear right at the end of the play, just as it seems that the whole problem has been resolved. Before Romeo is shot by the man whom he has 'unconsciously' betrayed, there is a brief exchange about the sophistication of science:

Giorgio: ... Oggi la scienza, caro, tutto quello che si sa, è così tanto, così tanto, che non basta la vita d'un uomo a impadronirsi veramente d'un sol punto dello scibile. I progressi in ogni campo sono enormi.

Romeo: Sì, sì, e la vita è tutta ricostruita dall'uomo, come un mondo nel mondo, creato da tutto ciò che l'uomo sente e sa.

Giorgio: E la vita, se ci pensi bene, se n'è talmente invalorata che è divenuta per tutti prodigiosa; non pare quasi umana (MN II 887).

It has been Romeo's struggle to try to make his friends accept another image of man alongside the scientific one, to make them see that "Oltre la vita umana, costruita da noi, c'è il mondo, il mistero eterno del mondo;" and that this world is untouched, as he and Ginevra discovered, by moral beliefs and knowledge. The final scene shows that men cannot accept their unconscious and the irrational: Giorgio's shot is his refusal of it. But Romeo realises as he dies that this was inevitable: "Anche questo è umano" (MN II 888).

The clash of perceptions of reality in the play finds a parallel in two styles of writing. On the one hand there is the melodramatic cut and thrust of confession and accusation. On the other hand there are the long visionary monologues by Romeo evoking his uncertain, suspended inner world in a contemplative style which has the cadences of incantation created by the repetition of 'And' - "E" (see for example the passage (MN II 838) quoted above). But whereas in Diana e la Tuda the jealousy of Tuda and Sara clashes with the symbolic level and with the visionary subtext, the

existential drama of "How shall I live?", here the problems of relationships, are integrated with the other-worldly theme, for these are the two poles between which the main character vacillates. The mysticism leavens the realism, imbuing the play with an extra dimension, like the "misterioso azzurro lunare" which invades the set after one of Romeo's monologues.

NOTES

¹ Antonio Illiano, Metapsichica e letteratura in Pirandello.

² Frederick May, Introd., Short Stories by Pirandello (Oxford University Press, 1965), p.xv.

³ De Castris, p.196.

⁴ Ibid., p.194.

⁵ Ibid., p.188.

⁶ Ibid., pp.186-7.

⁷ Ibid., p.196.

⁸ A. Richard Sogliuzzo, Luigi Pirandello, Director: The Playwright in the Theatre (Metuchen and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1982), pp.98-99.

One of Sogliuzzo's footnotes quotes from an interview Pirandello gave to Giulio Caprin, printed as "Colloquio con Pirandello" in Lettura, XXVII, No.3 Milano (1 March 1927): "While I cannot believe in the eternity of individual beings who are fallen (temporal) forms, I believe absolutely in the eternity of the spirit."

⁹ Antonio Illiano, "A View of the Italian Absurd from Pirandello to Eduardo de Filippo", p.60.

¹⁰ Jean-Michel Gardair, Pirandello: fantasmes et logique du double (Paris: Larousse, 1972).

¹¹ Gaspare Giudice, Pirandello (Torino: U.T.E.T., 1963), pp.172-3.

¹² "I speak not now of your ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his century, whether it be Buddhist, Christian or Mohammedan. His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit. It would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life. We must make search rather for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct. These experiences we can only find in individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather." William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902, reprint edn. 1909), p.6.

¹³ May, Introd, p.xv.

¹⁴ See for example "Tra due ombre", NA I 863.

¹⁵ See for example Aurelio, TR 687 and Nino, TR 679.

¹⁶ Compare Adriana's contentment with one moment of insight with that of Richard Jefferies (1848-87):

This may be the end; my soul may sink like rain into the earth and disappear....I say it is nothing to me; this only I know, that while I have lived - now, this moment, while I live - I think immortality, I lift my mind to a Fourth Idea. If I pass into utter oblivion, yet I have had that.

(The Story of my Heart, Happold, p.392).

The Upanishads teach that once the deep Self, the Atman, has been glimpsed then death is feared no more, "man becomes free from the jaws of death" (The Upanishads, p.61).

17 See PPPP, 239-40.

18 See MN II 869. This kind of mystical experience is similar to the Hindu one in that it involves not the appearance of the Divine or the Real but the putting aside of the mental constructs and habits which obscure it from our view. Such mysticism is not world-rejecting or escapist.

19 Compassion plays an important role in Buddhist mysticism:

"Identifying oneself with all, one pervades the entire universe with thoughts of compassion, with heart grown great, wide, deep, boundless, purified of all ill-will." (Brahma Viharas, Happold, p.172).

20 See LQI 31.

21 "Many mystical scriptures are indeed little more than musical compositions". James, p.421.

22 For example, Jørn Moestrup, The Structural Patterns of Pirandello's Work (Odense: Odense University Press, 1972).

23 "oscillating between the real and symbolic", Simoni in Mito, 15th January 1927; "disoriented" (La Stampa, Torino), 5th February 1927, quoted by Sogliuzzo, pp.224 and 225.

24 Sogliuzzo, p.227.

25 Ionesco who hated his father too ("Tout ce que j'ai fait, c'est en quelque sorte contre lui que je l'ai fait", PPPP 23) recounts the following experience: "Aujourd'hui, chez le coiffeur, en me regardant dans la glace, j'ai surpris, sur mes lèvres, le sourire de mon père" (PPPP 179).

26 Tony Tanner in Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979) identifies adultery as a key theme in the bourgeois novel. His comments are illuminating in the context of this thesis where 'other' dimensions within the mind are at issue as well as 'other' realities. "It is well known how bourgeois society tends to enforce unitary roles on its members who then impose them on themselves. From the point of view of that society, adultery introduces a bad multiplicity within the requisite unities of social roles" (p.13). Baldovino and Memmo refuse the normal bourgeois marriage contract, indulging in what Tanner calls a "cynicism of forms" (p.18). They refuse the all-encompassing nature of bourgeois marriage - "For bourgeois society marriage is the all-subsuming, all-organising, all-containing contract" (Tanner, p.15) - because they are alert to its non-absolute nature as revealed by visionary experience.

CHAPTER 4

THE VISIONARY MOMENT IN THE WORK OF IONESCO

I Introduction

Visionary experience is a forceful presence in Ionesco's work, influencing diction, imagery and plot. Its source lies in haunting personal experiences evidenced in the notebooks and diaries. These experiences provide a conceptual framework for his view of human nature, the impulse for his writing and the basis for his artistic theories.¹ Their powerfulness led him to an extensive exploration of the works of mystical writers such as Dionysius the Areopagite and St. John of the Cross.

As a formative experience the visionary moment can be seen as a unifying force in Ionesco's work, providing organic links between his different styles of theatrical writing and between his different genres. Many critics have analysed the contrast between images of heaviness ("lourdeur") and those of evanescence in Ionesco's work.² Mary Ann Witt refers to this as a "dialectic of space", while Richard Schechner describes it as a tension or contradiction between inner and outer realities and notes that it is this dialectic which replaces plot in the early plays. He goes on to argue that the change in dramatic style – particularly the rise of the anti-hero, Bérenger – which occurs between Le Tableau (1955?) and Tueur sans gages (1957) was a result of Ionesco becoming more "ontologically secure" following his success as a playwright. The argument of this chapter is that the tension identified by these two critics as characterising individual works can also account for the two main theatrical styles

found in Ionesco's work. The tension functions over the broad movement of his development. What emerges is the evolution discussed in Chapter 2 from the Absurd to mysticism, a movement which is not a true evolution but rather a change of standpoint with regard to the same world. The reality depicted or evoked in the later plays is the same as that of the early plays. It is just that Ionesco has turned his gaze away from the alienated outer world to concentrate on the fragmented inner world. These are two sides of the same vision.

II Visionary Moments, Dreams and Childhood

It is a striking feature of Ionesco's vision and of his work that he draws no line between public and private spheres of life. This is evident above all in Journal en miettes and Présent passé, passé présent where personal memories and dreams are found alongside reflections on politics, art and structuralism. The very title of Présent passé, passé présent announces that he sees human life as directed by a single impulse, the search for one thing, the answer to one question. The search is for something universal and eternal in a fragmented, changing world and the question is what is the relationship between that world and the individual 'I'. In Découvertes he describes the themes of his work as being "du moi et du tout, et du moi dans le tout" (DEC 89). Visionary experience is one key tool in this search but Ionesco also draws heavily on dreams and memories - especially on memories of childhood. This section will therefore examine not so much the content of the dreams and memories as Ionesco's attitudes to them, his use of them and their relationship to visionary experience.

Writers have always drawn on their personal experiences and used them in various ways in their art, but usually they know what vision or 'sense of life' they are aiming to distil from them before they put pen to paper. In Ionesco's case, the 'distillation' becomes the object of both the search and the act of writing.³ He runs the risk, as he mulls over dreams and experiences, of producing writing which is either very repetitive or which fails to appeal to readers and audience because detailed knowledge of his life is necessary for an understanding of the work. Ionesco's late plays in particular have attracted such accusations.⁴ Ionesco is aware of this danger and repeatedly defends his constant references to himself and his own vicissitudes:

En exprimant mes obsessions fondamentales, j'exprime ma plus profonde humanité, je rejoins tout le monde spontanément au-delà de toutes les barrières de castes et psychologies diverses. J'exprime ma solitude et je rejoins toutes les solitudes; ma joie d'exister ou mon étonnement d'être sont ceux de tout le monde même si, pour le moment, tout le monde refuse de s'y reconnaître (NCN 87).⁵

In the belief that the individual's inner world and the contents of the unconscious are common to all men, Ionesco therefore considers that it is the duty of the artist to put such things into artistic form with as little conscious interference or re-ordering as possible.⁶

Ionesco sees his "expériences de lumière" also as being common to all men in all times. They are beyond words and concepts and therefore beyond history:

Il y a des états d'esprit, des intuitions, absolument extra-temporelles, extra-historiques. Lorsque je me réveille, par un matin de grâce, aussi bien de mon sommeil nocturne que du sommeil mental de l'accoutumance, et que je prends soudain conscience de mon existence, et de la présence universelle, que tout me paraît étrange, et à la fois familier, lorsque l'étonnement d'être m'envahit, ce sentiment, cette intuition appartient à n'importe quel homme, à n'importe quel temps. Cet état d'esprit, on peut le retrouver exprimé presque avec les mêmes mots chez des poètes, des mystiques, des philosophes, qui le ressentent exactement comme je le ressens, et comme l'ont certainement ressenti tous les hommes, s'ils ne sont pas morts spirituellement ou aveuglés par les besoins de la politique; on peut retrouver cet état d'esprit, clairement exprimé, absolument le même, aussi bien au Moyen Âge que dans l'Antiquité ou à n'importe quel siècle "historique". Dans cet instant éternel, le cordonnier et le philosophe, l'"esclave" et le "maître", le prêtre et le profane se rencontrent, s'identifient (NCN 65).

The visionary moment is not only a source of unity for the individual in his relationship with himself and the outside world but also for all history and all cultures. Furthermore, it is a unifying phenomenon in the context of religious 'systems', an area where differences so often lead to violence:

Les expériences des mystiques ont été identiques, indépendamment des époques et des sociétés ou cultures dans lesquelles les mystiques ont vécu. Il n'y a pas de différence fondamentale entre la pensée mystique de l'Aréopagite et celle de saint Jean de la Croix, entre l'Ecclésiaste et sainte Thérèse; entre un brahmane et un moine du mont Athos. Pour tous, l'extase se réalise de la

même façon; chez tous, la même tentative impossible de nous rendre compte de l'expérience ineffable; chez tous, la même vision de la lumière, la même intégration contemplative. Les mystiques chrétiens vous parlent de la redécouverte de soi dans Dieu ou l'Univers tout comme les Hindous pour qui l'Atman est à la fois soi-même et l'Universel. Voilà donc une chose qui dépasse toute l'histoire des cultures; une redécouverte, une identification essentielle au-delà des frontières individuelles aussi bien qu'au-delà des organismes collectifs; l'Image du monde des grands mystiques est identique par-delà les siècles et les espaces. Une intuition unique (PPPP 157).

Such arguments are also grist to the mill of Ionesco's conflict with Marxist critics or those who believe that art should address specific socio-political problems. The similarities in the thought of mystics of varied religious traditions provide Ionesco with evidence that there exists a constant human nature which subsists outside the conditioning influences of history and environment and which is essential and perhaps even spiritual.

The visionary moment is of further universal significance for Ionesco in that he views what it reveals as being the object of all human endeavour; the experience of light is also that of the absolute, of paradise and of the Ideal. He pictures human beings as groping around in the dark on the wall of a vast, unknown house for the switch which will "déclencher cet état de veille sur-normal, qui pourrait embraser le monde, qui pourrait le transfigurer,...." (PPPP 234). It is the distant call of "le monde essentiel" which urged men to explore the sea in the mistaken belief that paradise could be found in this life. It is the same voice which calls revolutionaries.⁷ Underlying this urge to go 'beyond' is the perception of everyday life and earthly existence as a prison. Ionesco claims that all philosophies and religions and ideologies see man as alienated: "Il n'y a pas de religion dans laquelle la vie de tous les jours ne soit considérée comme une prison; il n'y a pas de philosophie ou d'idéologie qui ne considère que nous ne vivons dans l'aliénation:" Even materialist ideologies which deny transcendence are fed by the nostalgia for freedom which

Ionesco describes as "la beauté, ... la vraie vie, la plénitude, la lumière" (PPPP 235-6).

Ionesco's first experience of Paradise was during his childhood, part of which he spent in the country at La Chapelle-Anthenaise. He seems to have linked the sense of timelessness and the ignorance of death which characterised his childhood with its physical setting, for the landscape, light and colours became a constant feature of his visionary experiences. Explaining to Claude Bonnefoy why this time was paradise for him, he refers to the brightness and freshness of the colours.⁸ During his return to his "lieux d'enfance" he notes "Mon goût pour les couleurs violentes, presque agressives, provient de ce temps. Je suis toujours à la recherche d'un certain ciel, de certains champs, d'une intensité des couleurs telles qu'elles paraissent à la rétine vierge des enfants" (LPC 182). One particular memory recorded in Présent passé, passé présent illustrates this well and invites comparison with Giuncano's vision in Diana e la Tuda:

Je traverse un chemin creux, plein d'ombres. Je débouche en pleine lumière: des coquelicots rouges dans du blé jaune, un ciel tellement bleu. Jamais je n'ai vu depuis un rouge aussi éclatant, un jaune aussi jaune, un bleu aussi intense, une lumière aussi jeune, aussi fraîche, aussi neuve. Ce devait être le premier jour de la naissance du monde (PPPP 35).⁹

Something of this experience is conveyed in some of the coloured drawings by Ionesco which have been reproduced in Découvertes. One in particular would seem to be directly related to visionary experience, depicting an eye (or is it the sun?) and a series of green and yellow strokes merging into each other (DEC 75). Other drawings suggest the blurring of outlines of the material world which occurs when the intense light invades it. They often show a selection of overlapping, elliptical or round shapes in many bright colours (DEC 94-5). Significantly the only drawings with precisely defined shapes are those which are related to death or a sense of menace. Death is depicted as a sinister spider-like figure with blank eyes and a

gaping mouth (DEC 86-7 and 56-7).

Ionesco's next experience of paradise came when he was 17 or 18 and walking through a small country town on a bright June day. The experience is described in several places and is clearly his most powerful.¹⁰ The bright light bursts through the shadows of habit and transforms what he sees. "Tout devenait à la fois profondément réel et profondément irréel" (JM 97). The light not only initiates the revelation but is actually seen to dissolve everyday reality or to cleanse it of the encrustations of habit and of the socio-political world: "Un monde que la lumière dissolvait et qu'elle reconstituait" (JM 97), and "non seulement un univers lavé mais un univers débarrassé" (PPPP 253). A typical feature of Ionesco's accounts of his visionary experience is the emphasis on amazement - "stupéfaction", "émerveillement" - which he associates with returning to a perception of things as they really are outside the distortions of human "media".

Tout d'un coup je sentis comme un coup que je recevais en plein coeur, au centre de mon être. La stupéfaction surgit, éclata, déborda, faisant dissoudre les frontières des choses, désarticulant les définitions, abolissant les significations des choses, des pensées, comme la lumière semblait faire disparaître les murs et les maisons que je longuais (PPPP 230).

He talks of experiencing "une présence absolue", of contacting the heart of reality. "J'avais eu la révélation de l'essentiel, le reste était inessentiel" (JM 98).

Perhaps the most important element of the moment of vision for Ionesco is that it gives him a sense of Self and an awareness of being which conquers his fear of death. His terms become explicitly religious here:

J'étais sauvé, maintenant. Il était impossible que je redevienne la proie de la boue des ténèbres, puisque je savais maintenant, d'une façon lumineuse, je savais, et ne pouvais plus oublier, je suis, moi je suis, tout est. Le miracle d'être, le miracle d'être, le miracle d'être (PPPP 233).

This heightened sense of self contrasts with the loss of the individual self in the All which is found in some of Pirandello's descriptions where a

return to a lost homeland is often glimpsed and all earthly life is felt to be unreal and ghostly. The role of the natural world is also significantly different from that in Pirandello's work. The Pirandellian visionary tends to reach out to nature in pantheistic fashion as the source of the divine. Although Ionesco's experiences were sparked off by natural surroundings, nature itself does not maintain its value as a real entity or force in its own right. Rather, the elements of nature – light and colour – are appropriated as symbols, or as a way of evoking the inner vision.

De toute façon, l'euphorie est liée aux couleurs, à la végétation, à la lumière éclatante, que cela soit en rêve ou appréhendé en état de veille. Ainsi, les images oniriques de la végétation et de la lumière ensoleillée qui filtre à travers les branches vertes des arbres (JM 98).

Ionesco experienced another moment of light after an operation as he was convalescing in the country. He felt that he had left behind his past and his plays, which now had no meaning at all for him. Like Tommaso Corsi of Pirandello's Il dovere del medico and Vitangelo Moscarda in Uno, nessuno e centomila, Ionesco experienced a luminous happiness because he was "détaché de tout, sauf de la beauté de ce monde, ... je voyais ce monde comme en transparence; ..." (ECB 114).¹¹

A rather different type of visionary moment happened to Ionesco not in an idyllic natural setting but in his dingy ground floor flat in Paris in which some nappies were hung up to dry. A friend arrived in a gloomy mood and held forth about the ugliness and sordidness of life. Whereupon Ionesco suddenly saw the nappies detached from their everyday purpose and solely in terms of light: "... tout d'un coup, j'avais eu l'impression que le linge, sur la ficelle, était d'une beauté insolite, le monde vierge, éclatant. J'avais réussi à le voir avec des yeux de peintre pour ses qualités de lumière. A partir de là, tout semblait beau, tout se transfigurait" (ECB 31). It is clear from this particular experience that what is involved is not so much a vision of an invisible but immanent force or the

revelation of the divine or the transcendental, as the perception of reality from a new viewpoint involving the casting away of all habitual meanings. Reality is liberated from the "Symbolic order", from mental and verbal webs of meaning. The light is seen to erupt from within things, it is "cachée sous les masques des choses" (JM 58). By repeating a word again and again so that its true status as an arbitrary ensemble of sounds becomes apparent, Ionesco finds he can glimpse a "pure" reality: "tout devenait réalité en soi, ineffable, indépendant de tout système relationnel" (PPPP 226). Only on rare occasions does Ionesco suggest the presence of something spiritual or divine. On one of these, similar to the 'nappy' epiphany, sunlight suddenly bursts into a gloomy room, metamorphosing both Ionesco and the world around him. He tells his wife "rien, en ce moment, ne compte à côté de ce rayonnement de l'Être, cette lumière est notre pain et notre vin" (JM 55). In Journal en miettes and also in Découvertes written two years later in 1969, he uses the term "Manifestation" with the suggestion that it is some part of an invisible Essence or Being. The emphasis on stillness is particularly Eastern.

Dans l'immobilité de la plénitude de la conscience retrouvée, je veux dire dans laquelle je me retrouve, c'est le seul événement essentiel que je retrouve, l'événement primordial, la Manifestation, comme un voile lumineux à travers lequel j'aperçois l'ombre de ce qui se manifeste. Dans l'immobilité du regard attentif ce n'est plus le temps qui s'écoule, c'est la Manifestation qui se déroule comme dans un espace hors du temps, sans le temps. Je regarde silencieusement ce tapis géant, je le connais, j'en prends connaissance (DEC 83).

Ionesco's accounts of visionary experience constantly point out paradoxes and ambiguities: the world seems familiar yet mysterious, real yet unreal; he is "enraciné en moi-même et détaché de moi-même, comme si j'étais à la fois l'acteur et mon propre spectateur" (JM 55).¹² He feels most at home in the world when he is distanced from it and experiences it as strange. "Paradoxalement, c'est lorsque la Création nous apparaît mystérieuse et incroyable qu'elle devient certitude et présence, prête à nous révéler sa

signification" (ANT 197). One way in which Ionesco puts himself outside the world is by questioning it – even if he knows that the question is essentially unanswerable. "L'interrogation 'où suis-je, qui suis-je' me désoriente, disloque les objets et, en même temps, me réintègre au plus profond de moi-même..." (PPPP 239). This procedure whereby alienation becomes union is not only a personal strategy for survival but also a literary method. The notion that a work of art should ask questions rather than provide answers recurs in Ionesco's theoretical writings.¹³

C'est au moment où j'ai l'impression que je me détache du monde que j'y suis le plus attaché. C'est au moment où j'ai l'impression d'être en marge du monde que je me retrouve au coeur du monde. Telle est pour moi l'expérience de la littérature; oublier le monde pour le retrouver ou plutôt pour le trouver (DEC 107).

This formulation offers a key to the evolution of Ionesco's dramaturgy and expresses succinctly the dilemma and procedure of his inner world. These have been convincingly discussed by Ross Chambers in his article "Eugène Ionesco ou comment s'envoler", and they provide a more satisfactory account of Ionesco's theatrical world than does Schechner's article referred to at the beginning of this chapter. The essence of Chambers' argument is identical to the contention of this thesis that the Absurd constitutes an integral part of mysticism, though Chambers uses a different terminology. He claims that Ionesco defines himself in terms of opposition to the world, indeed that he only feels truly alive in a condition of menace from without:

on voit l'être s'affirmer ici par opposition au non-être, l'irréalité du monde impliquant la réalité du moi: c'est en s'apercevant que le monde est absurde que Ionesco connaît la libération qui consiste à savoir qu'il n'est pas le monde, qu'il est séparé du monde. ...¹⁴

In his early plays Ionesco's strategy is to make the world unreal in order to make himself more real. Chambers sees Ionesco's choice of genre as significant in this context, for the theatre is an apparent world and so he who creates such a world is by definition outside it, manipulating it.

Chambers rightly notes that from the first Ionesco associated the theatre with a feeling that the world is an unreal, derisory farce:

... dans mon enfance, ma mère ne pouvait m'arracher au guignol du jardin du Luxembourg....Le spectacle du guignol me tenait là, comme stupéfait, par la vision de ces poupées qui parlaient, qui bougeaient, se matraquaient. C'était le spectacle même du monde qui, insolite, invraisemblable, mais plus vrai que le vrai, se présentait à moi sous une forme infiniment simplifiée et caricaturale, comme pour souligner la grotesque et brutale vérité. Plus tard aussi, jusqu'à quinze ans, n'importe quelle pièce de théâtre me passionnait, et n'importe quelle pièce me donnait le sentiment que le monde est insolite, sentiment aux racines si profondes qu'il ne m'a jamais abandonné. Chaque spectacle réveillait en moi ce sentiment de l'étrangeté du monde, qui ne m'apparaissait nulle part mieux qu'au théâtre (NCN 53).

An analysis of the visionary moments described in Ionesco's journals then, indicates that his destructive first phase of writing is the necessary prelude to the sustained investigation of the inner world and the 'beyond' which takes place in some of his later plays.

The passage from destruction to integration which forms the structure of the visionary moment is also an essential part of Ionesco's aims as a writer. The visionary moment reveals a pure, absolute reality which for Ionesco should be the subject of art. "Ce n'est pas que je veuille l'originalité littéraire, ce que je veux réaliser c'est l'expression de l'origine" (DEC 89). The writer must aim to make the reader or spectator experience the "insolite" by destroying the conventional modes of perception by which they live.

Pour s'arracher au quotidien, à l'habitude, à la paresse mentale qui nous cache l'étrangeté du monde, il faut recevoir comme un véritable coup de matraque. Sans une virginité nouvelle de l'esprit, sans une nouvelle prise de conscience, purifiée, de la réalité existentielle, il n'y a pas de théâtre, il n'y a pas d'art non plus; il faut réaliser une sorte de dislocation du réel, qui doit précéder sa réintégration (NCN 60).

One method of achieving this is by dismantling language which Ionesco considers a major source of alienation. Words stand between consciousness and the essential reality which is revealed in the visionary moment:

J'aspire à l'impossible, que mes paroles soient transparentes.

Des milliers et des milliers de mots, des masques et des mensonges et des errements devront dire ce que le mot cache. Il ne me reste qu'à démentir toute parole en la désarticulant, en la faisant éclater, en la transfigurant (PPPP 248).

It is part of Ionesco's artistic aim to make words (mots) express the Word (la Parole). He is aware that he shares the methods and the problems of mystics: how to express with words what lies beyond words.

Les mots doivent dire le silence, ils doivent dire la lumière. C'est pour cela, il me semble, que la technique poétique est similaire à la technique de la connaissance mystique qui demande de faire le vide au préalable, d'écarter les images, le sensible (images visuelles, auditives, tactiles, olfactives) pour retrouver à travers la nuit, au-delà de la nuit, par-delà les mots, la lumière et la parole premières (DEC 98).

In his Preface to a collection of essays by a number of critics, entitled The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theatrical Quest, Ionesco bestows a hard mission on literature and sees it as complementing the work of science as well as going beyond it. Literature should be religious in the Jamesian sense of the word, that is, it should relate to "a man's total reaction upon life":

Literature should tear people away from their mediocrity. Art and Literature should give back to people a certain taste for the ultimate knowledge, the absolute and total one, which the sciences - being analytical in nature - are able to present only in a fragmented way, therefore insufficient, in their lack of synthesis. Only art has the power to bring back to the world a spirit of synthesis which has been lost.¹⁵

Ionesco's visionary experiences have given rise to a specific vocabulary and set of symbols which he uses in his journals, essays and plays. Words such as "lumière", "joie", "étonnement", "insolite" form a kind of code in his work. Their usage is not confined to accounts of visionary experience, however. They spread into his views on dream and childhood so that these three areas come to constitute a private mythology in his work, a framework by means of which he gives unity and structure to his life.

While his childhood strongly influenced his vocation as a writer and features frequently in his journals, Ionesco uses his dreams directly in

his plays and récits and also allows them to influence the structure of his work.¹⁶ Like visionary experience, dream involves a contact with an essential reality which shows up the everyday reality as insubstantial and absurd.

Je ne sais pas très bien si je rêve ou si je me souviens, si j'ai vécu ma vie ou si je l'ai rêvée. Le souvenir, autant que le rêve, me fait profondément ressentir l'irréalité, l'évanescence du monde, image fugitive dans l'eau mouvante, fumée colorée (PPPP 280).

Dreams cut through the distortions of ideology and history – "le rêve démystifie" (JM 47) – and are a repository of truth, "l'expression même de la vie dans sa complexité et ses incohérences,..." (ECB 121).¹⁷ Dream expresses man's most authentic consciousness: "Le rêve c'est la conscience profonde, substantielle" (ECB 77). In a typical reversal of values Ionesco declares "on n'est conscient, on n'est lucide que dans le rêve" (JM 74). By giving access to the universal and eternal, dreams are therefore a potential source of unity for the human race: "L'homme dont l'esprit est nourri par les rêves retrouve peut-être les archétypes; en tout cas, il n'est pas prisonnier des clichés" (ECB 123).¹⁸

Childhood is inextricably linked to visionary experience for Ionesco not simply because part of his own childhood was idyllic but rather because of more universal qualities inherent in the consciousness of children. He can be seen as continuing a tradition of mystical writing represented notably by English poets such as Traherne and Wordsworth:

En fait, je suis à la recherche d'un monde redevenu vierge, de la lumière paradisiaque de l'enfance, de la gloire du premier jour, gloire non ternie, univers intact qui doit m'apparaître comme s'il venait de naître.... Enfance et lumière se rejoignent, s'identifient dans mon esprit (ANT 316).¹⁹

The child possesses "l'étonnement tout à fait gratuit, tout à fait désintéressé devant le monde" because its perceptions are not yet mediated by words, dulled by habit or distorted by ideology (DEC 28).

In Découvertes the relationship between the mind of the child and the

external world is the focus of some detailed explication in which Ionesco attempts to show that some kind of pre-linguistic thought exists and that a 'given', absolute reality is accessible to the human mind this side of death. He is clearly writing against the materialism of (post-)structuralist thought which views the human self and reality as the product of language and the socially-constructed systems of signification. Ionesco's view of reality is, like much mystical thought, dualistic.

... lorsque l'on dit que le langage et la pensée sont une seule et même chose, que le langage n'est pas le moule trouvé, inventé par une pensée qui le précède, on veut dire, en somme, que l'on refuse toute métaphysique, que l'on est matérialiste: identifier le parler et le penser, c'est parfois nier la spiritualité, ou tout dualisme (DEC 44).

Having lamented the emptiness of words in his early work, Ionesco here seems to have altered his position slightly and now sees language as a reflection and instrument of thought which has a direct contact with reality:

La pensée s'exprime ou se manifeste dans ou par le langage, celui-ci étant à l'image de la Manifestation universelle qui exprime la pensée, préexistante, de Dieu, qui devient, se fait langage, expression d'une pensée qui était dans le silence, mais qui était (DEC 44).

Much of Découvertes is intellectually very suspect, like the contention that the noises made by a baby - "bi, bo, ba, bu" (DEC 33) - constitute a systematic language, and Ionesco's claim that his own infantile memories have provided the evidence for this theory. However, the essay is interesting for what it reveals of Ionesco's convictions and modes of thought.

There are two Falls in Ionesco's universe. First the tragedy of being born into a physical form and time and space, and then the Fall from the pristine perception of childhood. Ionesco sees the child as possessing a privileged oneness with the world. There is a very revealing drawing in Découvertes showing a child merged with a house and a caption "ma pensée cherchait ses mots" (DEC 42-3).²⁰ The child, for Ionesco, is naturally

endowed with the questioning outlook of the visionary; he accepts the world without taking it for granted. The adult, by contrast, places himself in opposition to the world because he has learnt of death and been trained to analyse (DEC 79). Ionesco's "quête de l'Absolu" is undertaken both beyond and within 'this' world. While seeking his metaphysical roots he also attempts to restore the plenitude of his childhood perception.

C'est bien cela le paradis, le monde du premier jour. Être chassé de l'enfance, c'est être chassé du paradis, c'est être adulte. On garde le souvenir, la nostalgie d'un présent, d'une présence, d'une plénitude que l'on essaie de retrouver par tous les moyens. Retrouver cela ou la compensation (PPPP 256).

The child is not only in contact with an essential reality but for Ionesco is an essential reality in its own right. He sees the child that he was as his true self. The process of ageing and becoming adult is felt to be a grotesque metamorphosis:

Où donc a pu disparaître celui que j'étais, celui que je dois être encore, l'enfant frêle, l'être neuf, et même l'adolescent qui gardait encore quelque chose de son enfance? Où ai-je disparu? Où suis-je, car ce ne peut être moi ce que je vois:... Je suis dans la peau d'un autre. J'ai expérimenté ce fait: on peut devenir un autre. Cela peut paraître absurde. Il ne me reste que le regret d'être un autre. C'est ce regret qui fait que je suis toujours moi-même, ou l'enfant que j'étais, que je suis, oh, mes couleurs, les couleurs du monde, mon autre ciel, mon autre monde, mes autres océans, mon continent d'autrefois (PPPP 41-2).

Ionesco's memories and notions of childhood have clearly interacted with his visionary experience to influence both his theatre and his view of 'history'. The child is essentially a contemplator, sitting and watching others act and the 'decor' change around him. Life explodes incomprehensibly before the passive child. It is an innately theatrical time of life. He sits outside life and can see the whole and experience it as an aesthetic object and "prendre connaissance":

C'est dans l'immobilité que je me retrouve, dans cette prise de conscience ou dans ce regard sans mouvement. Réinstallé dans le centre métaphysique du monde, ainsi je vois l'histoire qui se déroule devant moi, et je ne me déroule pas moi-même avec l'histoire, dans l'histoire (DEC 82-3).

He maintains that it is his ability to take the child's view of life that made him a writer. The farce of existence and the contortions of men are more easily recordable from the 'outside'. "J'ai une faculté d'étonnement qui fait que je peux, parfois, sortir de ce tourbillon et me réinstaller à ma vraie place, dans l'immobilité.... Je pense que c'est cette faculté d'étonnement qui fait que je suis littérateur et que je ne suis pas bon pour autre chose" (DEC 72-3). There is surely a structural similarity between this view of the artist and Pirandello's character-hounded writer who records the antics of the figures who step out of his imagination.²¹ Ionesco remembers that as a child it was not the mechanics of the action of the world or of the puppet theatre which attracted him, but the mere fact of action itself; an observation which may account for Ionesco's greater success with the short play than with the longer, more discursive form. The frenetic "tourbillon" of action in plays such as La Cantatrice chauve and Delire à deux can plausibly be seen as a child's eye view of the adult world. More than a prototype of the creative artist, however, the child is, for Ionesco, the source of a mystical method. In order to dispel anguish he tries to reproduce the immobility of the child and turn life back into spectacle:

Maintenant encore, pour me sortir de mes angoisses, je me mets comme en marge du monde et je le regarde, attentivement, comme si je voyais tout pour la première fois, comme au premier jour de ma conscience. A l'écart du monde, en retrait, je le contemple comme si je n'en faisais pas partie. Il m'arrive alors parfois de me sentir transporté par la joie (ANT 317).

On occasions, Ionesco not only puts himself outside the drama of life but also outside himself. This is not to say that he loses himself as Pirandello's characters do. Rather, in going outside himself he can observe himself and become aware of his existence. "Je regarde cet oreiller. Je me regarde regardant. Je suis infiniment surpris" (LPC 227).

In the final section of Découvertes the potentially egocentric and

even agoraphobic nature of Ionesco's stance is more obvious as the essay concludes with a piece of poetic rhetoric which glosses over the serious problem which the theme of visionary experience can expose, namely that of participation in the world. Ionesco sacrifices his theme to a fine, literary ending:

Il y aura, il y a les aubes nouvelles d'un triomphe, la fête.
Oui, tout peut changer d'un coup. Et moi, je peux retrouver
l'enfance. Et le monde peut être à ma mesure, me convenir.
Demain, demain il y aura, peut-être, une tout autre Manifestation
universelle, une autre Création et je serai, de nouveau, ébloui
devant Elle, tout occupé à regarder, tâchant vainement de m'y
reconnaître.

car, déjà, miraculeusement, les ombres disparaissent ainsi que
les murs et le Paysage universel s'étend, infiniment, devant moi.
Je redécouvre, découvre. L'étonnement agrandit de nouveau mes
yeux, agrandis avec le monde qui regrandit ...

... Chaque matin, tout change, tout commence.
Un nombre illimité de matins.

Demain, un monde tout neuf, plus étonnant encore avec un autre
ou d'autres soleils, dans un autre ciel (DEC 126 - as reproduced
from DEC, my underlining).

The underlined phrase "à ma mesure" reveals a major difference between Pirandello's mysticism and Ionesco's. Ionesco seeks to fit the world to himself. There is no loss of self in the "ground" or the other. In one of his interviews with Bonnefoy, Ionesco admits that this is a regression: "Puisque je ne peux pas arriver au degré supérieur du savoir ... j'essaie de revenir à un état d'innocence" (ECB 116). His writing is an essential tool in this attempt, not simply in the sense already mentioned of destroying the veneer of habit covering reality, but also in the Proustian sense of using writing to hold on to a past which is seen as a repository of reality:

En fait, je suis à la recherche d'un monde redevenu vierge, de la lumière paradisiaque de l'enfance, de la gloire du premier jour, gloire non ternie, univers intact qui doit m'apparaître comme s'il venait de naître. C'est comme si je voulais assister à l'évènement de la création du monde avant la déchéance et cet événement je le cherche à travers moi-même, comme si je voulais remonter le cours de l'Histoire ou à travers mes personnages qui sont d'autres

moi-même ou qui sont comme les autres qui me ressemblent, à la recherche, consciemment ou non, de la lumière absolue (ANT 316).²²

The best example of this kind of writing in Ionesco's oeuvre is the short piece "Printemps 1939" in which he notes his thoughts and memories as he walks through his "lieux d'enfance" as an adult. Its poetry is more convincing than that in Découvertes because it is less contrived and more honest. The writing has a more stringent literary flavour than some of his other retrospective pieces. A fine balance between memories and comment is maintained and the fragments are held together by verbal echoes (débris, mort, trous). This piece, like the récits, shows Ionesco's talent as a prose writer capable of evoking an atmosphere in very few lines. Mingling with some genuine memories in sharp focus are fragments of elusive symbolism which are infinitely suggestive and never resolve into a fixed meaning: "Sur la plus haute branche, très flexible, de l'arbre, je me balance" (LPC 176). The tone is typically Ionescan in its 'cosmic' dimension. The conventional dreamy lyricism of this mode of writing - "recherche du temps perdu" - is overlaid with metaphysical and religious aspects:

Des débris de souvenirs. Je me demande, parfois, s'ils m'appartiennent. De vagues lueurs dans la nuit. Quelques îlots émergent sur l'océan infini du néant. Prêts à s'engloutir, à leur tour. Dernières survivances (LPC 186).

Une lutte épuisante contre ^{les défaillances,} les obscurités de la mémoire: j'arrache des ombres à l'ombre. Des pays, des continents, des univers se sont engloutis, silencieusement, dans les abîmes sans fin: défaits, décomposés, fondus. Des trous immenses (LPC 227).

As old memories return "en mille morceaux et en désordre", Ionesco seeks some sign of permanence, but "Aujourd'hui les mêmes odeurs sont autres" (LPC 174). Rather like Giuncano in Diana e la Tuda and the lawyer of "La carriola" he senses that there is something beyond what he sees and what he remembers:

Une nostalgie profonde, poignante. Je suis torturé par des désirs sans nom pour des choses que j'ai perdues à jamais, que je n'ai jamais eues, jamais vues, dont je n'ai jamais su ce qu'elles sont (LPC 176).

Je regarde, par la fenêtre de mon ancienne chambre d'enfant. Il pleut, sur les buissons d'épines. Un écho intérieur, comme une mélodie à peine perceptible, surgit faiblement de quelles profondeurs? Une mélodie que je suis seul à entendre. Que me rappellent ces buissons, ces épines? Quel souvenir, par delà le souvenir, veut-il se faire entendre? Quelle journée, quel moment, quel événement enseveli dans la nuit? L'image du souvenir est détruite, seule reste comme son âme, désincarnée. A travers les ruines des ruines, se promène un revenant de revenant. Croire à la "réalité"? Elle se défait, elle est poussière (LPC 236-7).

The influence of Le Grand Meaulnes can be detected here but also perhaps that of Baudelaire. Ionesco not only uses writing to search for this 'buried' reality beyond the fleeting fragments of this world, but he attempts to body it forth in his writing and to create a world which will perhaps affect others as he has been affected by creation:

Oui, oui, il y a tout un monde dont on ne sait pas s'il est vrai ou faux, un monde qui me donnait comme une sorte de très grande nostalgie pour les choses qui auraient pu être ou qui ont été et qui ne sont plus, comme des univers proposés ou défunts. Et je faisais de la littérature pour en proposer d'autres à mon tour, des mondes possibles, d'autres mondes possibles.... je voulais imiter le miracle et faire d'autres petits miracles. De la création (ANT 333).

III The Visionary Moment in the Early Plays

It is clear from Ionesco's journals and notebooks that his early experiences and personal sensibility form the basis of his récits and his plays in a very direct way. It is not just that he uses his own experiences, dreams and memories in his work as events in the action but that his manner of perceiving and experiencing the world determines the very structure of his stage world and the texture of his language. This feature of his work has led to him being classified as an Expressionist.²³

My aim in this section is to illustrate the different ways in which Ionesco's sensibility underlies his writing. It is my contention that in his early plays, up until Tueur sans gages, Ionesco uses the two poles of his sensibility - "lourdeur" and "évanescence" - in a relatively uncritical, unconscious manner. With Tueur sans gages he begins to use his plays to investigate the significance of visionary experience. As a result the "expériences de lumière" become more fully integrated into the plots of the plays - the plays now have plots in the conventional sense of the word. Ionesco's scrutiny and analysis of his visionary experience have radical effects on his theatrical structures and I believe that his failure to make progress thematically (in his investigation) leads to artistic difficulties.

Germaine Brée has made a similar analysis of Ionesco's later works and my hypothesis is not substantially different from hers. She links Découvertes and Journal en miettes to the forms of drama Ionesco has produced and concludes that Ionesco's visionary sensibility is not easily transferable to the stage. "How could a playwright project concretely on the stage the inarticulate and ambivalent perceptions which he describes in Découvertes?"²⁴ The contemplative's view of the external world can produce a theatrical 'tableau' but not a drama which evolves out of conflict. So

Ionesco attempts to convey his inner vision "through initial metaphors that cannot evolve dramatically".²⁵ However Brée sees the three plays of the sixties as somehow separate from the early ones and interprets the new emphasis on his "positive feeling for existence" as an attempt to combat "the negative image of himself as the destructive playwright of the absurd".²⁶ I see the change rather in terms of the close relationship between the Absurd and Mysticism. Having destroyed his audience's unthinking faith in the solidity of everyday reality, he now quite logically attempts to lead them in search of the true reality which he senses and hopes lies beyond the one he has shown up as false. Moreover, the shift from what Brée calls "the negative and gleeful parodic destruction of everyday reality" is by no means as abrupt as she suggests.²⁷ The notion of something positive beyond normal perception – even if it is lost – is present as early as Les Chaises.

Finally, Brée calls this phase of Ionesco's writing "an attempt to transcend the closed world of the individual ego".²⁸ This is true in as much as Ionesco is here prepared to look closely at his inner world and try to link it to something beyond himself but at the same time, his quest is as ever for a justification for his existence and for some evidence of its survival after death.

The failure of this attempt to give the "expérience de lumière" a significance beyond itself leads Ionesco in his later plays – L'Homme aux valises (1975) and Voyages chez les morts (1981) – to turn his attention to another type of beyond, his private world of dreams and memories, in the hope of finding some kind of permanence there. This last play more than any other is firmly based on events and situations from Ionesco's past, almost at the expense of any wider relevance.

In Chapter 2 I described how Ionesco experiences the world in three ways. When he perceives the Absurdity of life, he can be subject to a

claustrophobic sense of heaviness and suffocation by matter and bodily existence ("lourdeur") or else he sees everything as fleeting and fragile ("évanescence"). These two states constitute "la nausée du vide. Et puis la nausée du trop-plein" (LS 122). Anguish, alienation and a sense of futility accompany both sensations. During the visionary moment however, a balance between the two is achieved: he is neither too far inside life nor too far outside it. "Ne pas être tout à fait au monde, disais-je. Ne pas être non plus hors du monde, car si l'écart est trop grand je suis comme un poisson qui suffoque hors de l'eau.... Ne pas être tout à fait au monde, bien sûr, mais être dans sa lumière. L'avoir en vue. Neuf" (DEC 105). These experiences are the direct source of the moods and image patterns in Ionesco's plays. Absurdity is associated with mud, water, sinking, opacity and darkness and dizziness. Visionary euphoria is linked to light, flight, space and wonder.

Ionesco uses these antitheses in two distinct ways which may occur separately or combined. Some of his early plays are a dramatic representation of the way he perceives reality when in one of his two 'absurd' moods. In other plays one of the characters will be subject to the same moods as the author so that the alternating of heaviness and emptiness will affect either the language or the structure (plot) of the play as a whole or sometimes both.

The visionary moment also affects the type of characters and the conflicts Ionesco creates. As in Pirandello's work there are two basic types of character: those who put their faith in "forms" and attempt to satisfy their desire for unity through reason, language, habits and conventions; and those who look beyond forms in the knowledge of their factitiousness. Whereas Pirandello's habitual dramatic strategy is to bring these two contrasting perceptions of reality into confrontation, Ionesco in his early plays focuses primarily on the former group, the

"fantoques". Plays such as La Cantatrice chauve, La Leçon, Le Nouveau Locataire, Delire à deux, and Les Salutations are the product of Ionesco's negative mood: futility and emptiness are paradoxically conveyed by an excess of matter, words and objects. In these cases, Ionesco's perceptions provide the actions in the plays but the verbal imagery of heaviness is absent and none of the characters has awareness of alienation and futility. There is an "absence de vie intérieure" (NCN 253). La Cantatrice chauve is not just a parody of a play or the wilful destruction of reality aiming to give the audience a sense of the "insolite", this is Ionesco's vision in a very 'direct' form. "C'est le monde tel que, dans notre intériorité la plus intime, nous le voyons: insensé, inexplicable, du néant" (ANT 214). In the futile bickering of the couple in Delire à deux, in the violence which suddenly flares up in La Cantatrice chauve may be found the traces of Ionesco's experience of his parents' unhappy marriage and the rise of fascism in Rumania. The link between the child's uncomprehending perception of the spectacle before him and that of the adult experiencing "l'insolite" is made clearly in Notes et contre-notes:

Je n'ai pas d'autres images du monde, en dehors de celles exprimant l'évanescence et la dureté, la vanité et la colère, le néant ou la haine hideuse, inutile. C'est ainsi que l'existence a continué de m'apparaître. Tout n'a fait que confirmer ce que j'avais vu, ce que j'avais compris dans mon enfance: fureurs vaines et sordides, cris soudain étouffés par le silence, ombres s'engloutissant, à jamais, dans la nuit. Qu'ai-je à dire d'autre? (NCN 220)

Beginning with Les Chaises Ionesco focuses increasingly on the dilemma of the alienated consciousness which experiences reality in this manner and concomitantly this awareness is more than just presented but is shown striving to remedy its sense of exile and loss. The shift in emphasis therefore affects the plots of the plays. At the same time Ionesco's more positive euphoric mood features more and more strongly. The development of the autobiographical double is associated with the appearance of visionary

experience first in the verbal imagery, then in the mood of certain scenes and eventually as a central theme and the subject of critical enquiry. The link between the Absurd vision of La Cantatrice chauve and the outsider figure with mystical tendencies is pointed out by Ionesco himself:

Le Solitaire, je crois, ressemble beaucoup à La Cantatrice chauve. Cela peut paraître étonnant. Dans La Cantatrice chauve, qu'est-ce que je fais? Je me mets à l'écart du monde pour mieux voir son mouvement; je me distancie et je regarde les gens et tout ce qu'ils font paraît étonnant, ridicule, insensé. La même chose se passe avec le Solitaire (ECB 167).

Les Chaises is unique among Ionesco's plays in drawing closely on his childhood experience of Paradise and featuring visionary awareness in the form of a memory. The old man has a vague and fading memory of "un lieu, un temps exquis ..." (TH II 18). This motif returns in imagery which is at once Ionesco's personal visionary imagery and that of traditional mysticism. The references to a lost "ville de lumière" and to a path and a village with a church seem to be based on Ionesco's memories of La Chapelle-Anthenaise. The image of the garden is more biblical and carries suggestions of purity and harmony with the world. While the "ville de lumière" looks forward to Tueur sans gages, the character of the old man - full of regret and sense of failure and unable to remember one important detail of a past situation - anticipates Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser and La Soif et la faim.

Jacques ou la soumission is the first of Ionesco's plays to draw on the verbal imagery of both of his basic moods. It is used in the service of an anti-bourgeois polemic. The overall structure of the play is also based on one of Ionesco's moods, being one of increasing constriction and suffocation as Jacques' rebellion is crushed and he is overcome by the forces of convention, habit and materialism: "Ils ont bouché les portes, les fenêtres avec du rien, ils ont enlevé les escaliers ..." (TH I 124). The culmination of this process is Roberte's seduction of Jacques with

words evoking mud and humidity. This is no romantic submission but a giving in to matter and biology.

Viens... ne crains rien... Je suis humide... J'ai un collier de boue, mes seins fondent, mon bassin est mou, j'ai de l'eau dans mes crévasses. Je m'enlise. Mon vrai nom est Elise. Dans mon ventre il y a des étangs, des marécages... J'ai une maison d'argile. J'ai toujours frais... Il y a de la mousse, des mouches grasses, des cafards, des cloportes, des crapauds. Sous des couvertures trempées on fait l'amour... on y gonfle de bonheur! Je t'enlace de mes bras comme des couleuvres; de mes cuisses molles. Tu t'enfonces et tu fonds... (TH I 127).

The meaning of this imagery is reinforced at the end by the final sinister visual image of Roberte crouching like some kind of oriental goddess: "On voit seulement sa figure pâle, aux trois nez, se dandéliner, et ses neuf doigts s'agiter comme des reptiles" (TH I 130).²⁹

The imagery of light makes a brief appearance at the end of the sequel, L'Avenir est dans les oeufs where Jacques has become an integral part of "la race blanche" through marriage and reproduction. Here the images of light are not part of a distant memory but an aspiration, a cry for freedom from the 'production line': "Je veux une fontaine de lumière, de l'eau incandescente, un feu de glace, des neiges de feu" (TH I 156). Ionesco's personal imagery of fire and light, expressed in oxymorons, here combines with the accelerating rhythm and climactic suffocation characteristic of his earliest plays. In later plays such imagery will dominate whole scenes and its exact meaning will be the subject of scrutiny. Here it is auxiliary and is symbolic of an attitude of mind.

The récit "Une victime du devoir" which was the point of departure for the play Victimes du devoir shares this structure of gradual suffocation and the horrific scene of force-feeding forms the central thread. The play is rather more complex. The theatrical theory at the beginning is entirely absent from the récit while Choubert's journey through his memory and unconscious constitutes the bulk of the action with the force-feeding forming the final climax. It is for the evocation of the inner journey

that light imagery is used in conjunction with the landscapes and situations of Ionesco's own past: his mother's suicide threat, his memory of a Parisian street scene, his relationship with his father and the need to avenge his mother's unhappiness.³⁰ There are scenes and passages which look forward to Voyages chez les morts and La Vase. The succession of scenes involving confrontations and recriminations between members of a family will be the basic strategy in Voyages chez les morts.

The play anticipates accidentally the problems that Ionesco will have with his later plays in basing a drama on two antithetical moods which have no referential significance beyond themselves. In Victimes du devoir the meaninglessness of Choubert's inner wanderings is essential to Ionesco's purpose in depicting the workings of absolutism in art and life. The Detective and Madeleine constantly remark on their inconsequence almost as though Ionesco is criticising his own tendency to put his sensibility on stage. "Tes histoires personnelles, on s'en balance! Occupe-toi de Mallot... Ah! tes complexes! Tu ne vas pas nous embêter avec ça!" (TH I 185-6). This element of self-consciousness is more evident when the Detective and Madeleine become "des spectateurs de théâtre" and debunk Choubert's poetic light imagery:

Choubert: ... Au fond apparaît, lumineuse dans les ténèbres, dans un calme de rêve, entourée de tempête, une miraculeuse cité...

Madeleine: Une quoi?

Le Policier: La cité! la cité!

Madeleine: Je comprends.

Choubert: ... ou un miraculeux jardin, une fontaine jaillissante, des jeux d'eau, des fleurs de feu dans la nuit...

Madeleine: Et ça se croit poète, certainement! Du mauvais parnassianisme-symbolisme-surréalisme!

Choubert: ... un palais de flammes glacées, des statues lumineuses, des mers incandescentes, des continents qui flambent dans les nuits, dans les océans de neige!

Madeleine: C'est un cabotin! C'est idiot! (TH I 188-9).

As Madeleine rightly points out shortly after "Tout ceci est plein de contradictions." The light imagery here serves the polemic of the play but is not significant in itself and does not lead anywhere. The sinking and climbing movements merely provide the subjects around which Ionesco can elaborate visual and verbal patterns in order to show how the limits of the stage can be stretched.

As Choubert begins to climb, the familiar characteristics of Ionesco's experiences are recognisable: the leaving behind or dissolving of reality, "Plus de ville, plus de bois, plus de vallée, plus de mer, plus de ciel. Je suis seul."; the loss of the fear of death and the sensation of flight (TH I 195). One particular aspect emphasised here which will become an important theme in Ionesco's later use of the visionary experience is its solitude and its potentially anti-social nature. As Choubert shows signs of being about to fly off Madeleine cries out "Pense à nous. La solitude n'est pas bonne. Tu ne peux pas nous laisser... Aie pitié, pitié!" and attempts to lure him back to earth first through pity and then by showing him "tous les avantages de la vie quotidienne et sociale" (TH I 195). But as Choubert climbs higher earthly reality is seen in a worse and worse light - the mechanism is a familiar one in the Absurd/Mystical experience: "Le jeu du Policier et de Madeleine est de plus en plus grotesque, jusqu'à en devenir une sorte de clownerie" (TH I 195-6). By the end of the scene Choubert has passed through matter and become light. The invasion of the stage by darkness at the height of Choubert's 'illumination' embodies the reversal of terms central to mystical writing: "Le soleil se dissout dans une lumière plus grande que le soleil. Je passe à travers tout. Les formes ont disparu. Je monte... Je monte... (...) Je baigne dans la lumière. (Obscurité totale sur scène) La lumière me pénètre. Je suis étonné d'être, étonné d'être... étonné d'être... (...) Je suis lumière! Je

vole!" (TH I 196-8). But at this point the Detective realises that Choubert cannot go beyond this stage: "Il ne dépassera pas le mur de l'étonnement" and indeed Choubert falls to earth with a crash. The theme of what happens beyond wonder, of what the experience ultimately leads to, becomes a vital one in the later plays.

Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser is Ionesco's first full length (three act) play. It is also the first play to feature an autobiographical double - the abulic, struggling writer, Amédée, who escapes the "grisaille du quotidien" and literally flies off into space, thereby avoiding the fate to which other protagonists succumbed. The length of the play would seem to be linked then to Ionesco's attempts to resolve the Absurd crisis.

In the same way that Ionesco developed Les Chaises out of the oneiric image of chairs filling a stage, so Amédée grew out of the image of the growing corpse.³¹ The basic mood behind the play is again one of "lourdeur" and suffocation. The corpse not only dominates the couple's world spatially but also mentally.

Like many of Ionesco's symbols the corpse has several meanings. It is associated with Amédée's guilt and remorse, being the corpse of Madeleine's murdered lover (in the récit) or that of a child left with them. Amédée also remembers failing to rescue a drowning woman.³² The corpse is linked to the past, possessing "la progression géométrique... La maladie incurable des morts" (TH I 243). When its feet begin to take over the living room its movements are simultaneous with the hands of the clock, bearing out one of Ionesco's own suggestions that "Le cadavre qui grandit, c'est le temps" (ECB 83). It acquires another level^{of} meaning when Amédée begs Madeleine to let love solve their problem and she replies "Ce n'est pas l'amour qui peut débarrasser les gens des soucis de l'existence." (TH I 268). Overall the corpse would seem to stand for everything that stands between man and grace or plenitude. In Ionesco's words, "Le cadavre, c'est pour moi la faute, le

péché originel" (ECB 83).

Just before the growth of the corpse finally pushes Amédée into rebellion and the decision to remove it, there is a dream sequence in which Ionesco uses the imagery derived from his two moods to suggest the differences between Amédée and Madeleine. The scene is a flash-back to early on in their marriage. While the young Amédée talks ecstatically in images of light, transparency, flowers and churches, Madeleine sees only mud, darkness, desert and thorns:

Amédée II: Madeleine, réveille-toi, ouvrons les rideaux, c'est l'aurore du printemps... Réveille-toi... le soleil inonde la chambre... Lumière de gloire... Chaleur douce!...

Madeleine II: ... nuit, pluie, boue... le froid! je grelotte... noir... noir... noir!... Aveugle, tu embellis la réalité! Ne vois-tu pas que tu l'embellis?

Amedee II: C'est la réalité qui nous embellit (TH I 264).

The imagery does not express any precise conflict; it is used musically to evoke a complete lack of common understanding and finally becomes - as a similar passage in Jacques ou la soumission does - rhythmic chanting. The imagery of Amédée at the last is taken over by that of Madeleine: light gives way to darkness. From the first Madeleine is presented as a down-to-earth, practical person and the dream sequence suggests that her conception of reality is rather rigid. Yet her rejection of Amédée's love and imagination does not protect her from "les soucis de l'existence". In the end it is Amédée who proves the stronger. Once he has decided to face the problem of the corpse he suddenly comes into his own and reverses the pattern of dominance. Much calmer than Madeleine, he has a moment of philosophical reflection: now that he is about to part company with the cadaver he realises that in spite of everything he has become accustomed to it and finds it beautiful: "Il est toujours beau, pourtant. C'est bizarre, je m'étais malgré tout, habitué à lui" (TH I 272). The pattern is a familiar one: the suicides in Pirandello's novelle find something to love in life

just as they are about to leave it.

The flat in which Amédée and Madeleine have been shut for fifteen years now comes to symbolise earthly reality, for when Amédée opens the window and lets in the world beyond it, he experiences a kind of vision:

Regarde, Madeleine... tous les acacias brillent. Leurs fleurs explosent. Elles montent. La lune s'est épanouie au milieu du ciel, elle est devenue un astre vivant. La voie lactée, du lait épais, incandescent. Du miel, des nébuleuses à profusion, des chevelures, des routes dans le ciel, des ruisseaux d'argent liquide, des rivières, des étangs, des fleuves, des lacs, des océans, de la lumière palpable... J'en ai sur la main, regarde, on dirait des broderies... La lumière c'est de la soie... Je n'y avais encore jamais touché. Des bouquets de neige fleurie, des arbres dans le ciel, des jardins, des prairies... des dômes, des chapiteaux... des colonnes, des temples... (TH I 275).

The surrealistic poetry is the linguistic counterpart of the experience of transcendence. Madeleine is too busy with the corpse to share the moment. The contrast between the two is emphasised in the visual details: the macabre green light of the cadaver in the room contrasting with the silvery moonlight from without, "l'horrible et le beau doivent coexister."

From now on Amédée works under a full moon which, we are told, dazzles the townfolk so that they cannot see his escape. He keeps referring to the beauty of the sky throughout Act III in which he becomes not only free of the room (his past, his former limits) but also, eventually, of the earth. It is significant that the corpse – the source of oppression – becomes the instrument of liberation. This encapsulates perfectly the double nature of the Absurd: disillusion with present reality is the first step on the path to a reality beyond.

Amédée's lift-off is unwilling and it is here that the theme of writing is brought back to the foreground. As he escapes Amédée makes two statements of artistic policy, declaring a deep commitment to life, progress and realism. His play is

Une pièce dans laquelle je prends le parti des vivants contre les morts. Une idée de Madeleine. Je suis pour l'engagement, je crois au progrès, Monsieur. Une pièce à thèse contre le nihilisme, pour

un nouvel humanisme, plus éclairé que l'ancien (TH I 286).

Je voudrais bien rester... Rester les pieds sur terre... C'est contre ma volonté... Je ne veux pas qu'on m'emporte... Je suis pour le progrès, je désire être utile à mes semblables... Je suis pour le réalisme social... (...) Je vous jure, je suis contre la dissolution... Je suis pour l'immanence, contre la transcendance... je voulais, je voulais pourtant assumer le monde... (TH I 293).

There are perhaps two ideas involved here. It is typical of the Absurd experience that once a person has glimpsed the beyond then it is impossible to ignore it and return to a whole-hearted commitment to reality as it was previously conceived. Having renewed his lust for life by going outside it, Amédée finds that he cannot then return to it and put his new energy to his desired purpose. With Madeleine too earthbound and Amédée too detached, the problem seems to be to find the middle way and to keep visionary experience as a moment rather than a state. Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser holds the seeds of some of Ionesco's later work on the subject of visionary experience in which he discusses whether it is right to solve the Absurd crisis by opting out of life. It is possible that here Ionesco was mocking his own tendency to focus on other-worldly issues, rather than socio-political problems, and to oppose political commitment.

Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser would seem to be a rather muddled play; the theatrical (visual) wizardry is not matched by the other elements in the play – the dialogue lacks economy and the dramatic structure is not suited to the themes. Ionesco is the first to admit the flawed nature of the play which appears to be due to the fact that his inspiration from the original image of the growing corpse ran out in the middle of the second Act: "Dans Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser, on s'aperçoit qu'il y a eu un certain blocage.... A partir de la deuxième moitié de la deuxième acte, on sent que je tire à la ligne" (ECB 84-5). The problem of finding dramatic structures and techniques to fit visual, oneiric images is one that will beset Ionesco constantly in his attempts to investigate his

"expériences de lumière".

IV Tueur sans gages

The play Tueur sans gages was written two years after the récit on which it is based. As in the case of the other récits, the starting point of "La Photo du colonel" was an element of Ionesco's personal world, here a dream in which he was looking for a murderer and finally came face to face with him.³³ The play is considerably more complicated than the récit. The meeting with Dany and her subsequent death adds a personal dimension to Bérenger's quest for the killer, while the Mère Pipe scene substantially broadens the thematic scope.

The play and the récit share the same structure based on Ionesco's two moods and these are typically evoked in expressionistic fashion in terms of an external landscape. The play begins with the protagonist Bérenger experiencing visionary euphoria, expressed through light and space, a clear sky, sunshine and silence. When Bérenger discovers the existence of the killer the light dims and the stage begins to fill with objects and noise. Act II sees the culmination of cacophony and clutter, the setting being a "pièce obscure, basse de plafond" with shabby furniture, situated on a noisy street and the weather turning to snow and rain. The oppressive, grey mood dominates until the point in Act III when Bérenger, having fought his way through the obstructions of the traffic and policemen, sets off alone to present the evidence to the police (Law and Justice) but instead encounters the killer himself. His solitude and "le vide qui l'entoure" are suggested again by space and a "lumière blafarde". The pattern is familiar, suggesting the structure of a human life as Ionesco sees it: the child's virgin perception is clouded by awareness of time and death, and becomes increasingly given over to matter and the physical until death, when once again a pure contact with a metaphysical reality is attained. The final act also has the structure of the Absurd crisis: Bérenger goes

beyond human systems and ideologies (Mère Pipe and the traffic system) and comes face to face with the fundamental condition of humanity, the mystery of mortality. But while the open space signifies the passing beyond the anthropocentric world, the stage directions also indicate that there must be a sense of closing in, of Béranger walking into a trap. He is free of the world but is trapped both by death and by the limits of his knowledge. Even though the space returns, the light of euphoria does not. The twilight of the final scene suggests the state of being suspended between states. Whether death really is the limit of human life is the question the play poses but cannot answer. Béranger's impasse is also Ionesco's. The real mystery of the play is not the identity of the killer but his meaninglessness and gratuitousness – as suggested by the "sans gages" of the title. The form of the play is, rather as in Victimes du devoir, that of the detective drama in which knowing 'who dunnit' does not ultimately explain anything. The real problem is 'why'. The play concerns human helplessness and the limits of reason and knowledge.

Nevertheless critics have frequently been drawn into the 'detective' mode of the play and attempted to fix one meaning to the figure of the Killer.³⁴ Schechner's notion that "the Killer is death himself..." does not explain why Ionesco presents him as a beggar selling "Des fleurs artificielles, des ciseaux, des bonnets de nuit anciens, des cartes... des cartes postales... des cigarettes américaines... des miniatures obscènes, ..." (TH II 146), and finally luring his victims to their end with the Colonel's photograph.³⁵ Furthermore it seems psychologically unconvincing to portray death as a criminal trick. I believe the figure's multivalence is intimately related to the play's presentation of a multiplicity of attitudes to absurdity. In being "Insaisissable" the Killer embodies the void at the heart of life, yet his multiple attributes and activities, while reinforcing his gratuitous nature, are also representative of the

many reactions which Ionesco sees as resulting from man's fear of death.³⁶

Such multivalent symbolism is typical of Ionesco's late dramatic style in which the general meaning of the play is usually very clear while the details do not add up to a single idea. In the case of Tueur sans gages this dramatic style may be traceable to the play's double birth as a dream and then a récit. Whereas the récit is a transcription of a dream, the play has an added conscious dimension consisting of attention to the limitations of the stage and of elaborate thematic structuring. This results in two styles of writing: the oneiric, expressionistic mode is overlaid with a level of satiric writing, as evidenced in the "chorus" of opinions and platitudes at the beginning of Act Two, and the parody of ideology in the Mère Pipe scene. Both of these scenes were additions to the original dream material.

Tueur sans gages marks the stage in Ionesco's development where visionary experience becomes a key element in the plot, much more than a term in a musical or symbolic antithesis with the aim of distinguishing two characters, and more than just a general mood. The play contains the most extended verbal portrayal of visionary experience in Ionesco's theatre. Along with Le Piéton de l'air and La Soif et la faim, Tueur sans gages shows Ionesco analysing his "expériences de lumière" to see what they might mean in rational terms. In these plays of his middle period he brings together the various elements of his personal world, attempting to reconcile his childhood memory of plenitude and his visionary experiences with his fear of death, his yearning for metaphysical certainty and his hatred of convention and tyranny.

A distinctive feature of the middle period plays and one which contributes to the dramatic style mentioned above is the way in which the action occurs on two levels simultaneously. The subjective experience of the protagonist is combined, as in the first scene of Tueur sans gages, with

the objective events of the outer reality. The dual action allows Ionesco to initiate in an extremely economical fashion the set of contrasts which forms part of the main structure of the play.

In the first act the contrast is between visionary insight and the world of scientific achievement, material practicality and systems. The "cité radieuse" represents both an architectural, technological achievement (a place), and Bérenger's experience of light. The duality of the image is quite explicit. "Votre lumière magique..." cries Bérenger. "Mon éclairage électrique!" corrects the Architect (TH II 121). The vocabulary of Ionesco's states of mind is used to refer to the place, the weather and to Bérenger's emotions. He has just left his dank lodgings in the cold, grey part of "notre ville sombre" and has arrived by mistake in "ce beau quartier clair", which reminds him of the "état lumineux" he experienced in his youth.

Bérenger's descriptions of these experiences are based very closely on Ionesco's accounts in Présent passé, passé présent though there is more emphasis here on a sense of equilibrium: "tout était un mélange de plénitude et de légèreté, un parfait équilibre" (TH II 129). Most of the time, Bérenger says, he lives in what he calls "l'hiver de l'âme", a state which arises from division, a disjunction between his inner world and the external conditions of his life: "lorsqu'il n'y a pas un accord total entre moi du dedans et moi du dehors, c'est la catastrophe, la contradiction universelle, la cassure." He longs for a sense of unity and harmony with the exterior world:

Vous savez, j'ai tellement besoin d'une autre vie, d'une nouvelle vie. Un autre cadre, un autre décor; un autre décor, vous allez penser que c'est bien peu de chose... (...) Un décor, cela n'est que superficiel, de l'esthétisme, s'il ne s'agit pas comment dire, d'un décor, d'une ambiance qui correspondrait à une nécessité intérieure, qui serait, en quelque sorte... (...) le jaillissement, le prolongement de l'univers du dedans (TH II 125).³⁷

Remembering his visionary moments he describes how the mind is entirely at

one with the reality before it, focusing only on the present time and place: "je ne pensais plus à rien, sauf à ces maisons-là, ce ciel profond, ce soleil qui semblait s'être rapproché, à portée de la main dans ce monde construit à ma mesure" (TH II 128). When Bérenger first arrives at the "cité radieuse" he does indeed forget his age and lose his sense of time. The sense of a unity with all things is conveyed by surrealistic images which blend the elements in an almost synaesthetic manner: "Les fleurs de feu, les arbres de flamme, les étangs de lumière, il n'y a que cela de vrai, au fond" (TH II 124). Bérenger feels in touch with both the truth of the outside world and of himself, "Je suis sûr que je redeviens moi-même, le monde redevient lui-même;..." (TH II 121). The contact is felt to be a renewal of perception, a return to a state of purity: "Tout était vierge, purifié, retrouvée..." (TH II 129) Bérenger's evocation, like Ionesco's own, is full of paradoxes; he feels full and light, alienated but at home, inside and outside the world: "Je me sentais là, aux portes de l'univers, au centre de l'univers... Cela doit vous paraître contradictoire!" (TH II 130). This last paradox is important for an understanding of the significance of visionary experience in Ionesco's world: it puts him outside the futile bustle of the world and beyond responsibility without subjecting him to alienation; he is still in the world but is not subsumed and overwhelmed by it.

The duality of the "cité radieuse" as a product of science and planning and as an externalisation of visionary experience suggests that the human desire for Utopia or a material Paradise is related to the desire for light. This is reinforced by Bérenger's suggestion to the Architect that the "cité radieuse" was an attempt to reproduce an experience of light:

... vous devez vous-même parfaitement me comprendre, cette lumière est aussi en vous, c'est la même, c'est la mienne puisque vous l'avez, de toute évidence, recréée, matérialisée. Ce quartier

radieux, il a bien jailli de vous... Vous me l'avez rendue, ma lumière oubliée... ou presque (TH II 131).

But if the impulse is identical, the methods are very different. While Béranger is idealistic, sentimental and spontaneous, the Architect is an efficient, rationalistic technocrat capable of designing systems to control the weather. Symbolically plugged into his own phone, he represents a compartmentalised society in which people only concern themselves with one small area of life and never look at the whole or see themselves as part of it. "Je ne saurais en juger. Ce n'est pas dans mes attributions. C'est le service de la logique qui s'en occupe" (TH II 126). He defines Béranger as being of a "poetic temperament" and has trouble understanding his manner of expression, "Nous ne parlons pas le même langage" (TH II 125). While Béranger enthuses in Proustian fashion about "les aubépines" and his "indicible euphorie", the Architect busies himself in his files and sets about chasing up his truant secretary. He also represents "L'Administration" and appears to occupy the posts of Commissaire, Doctor and psychologist. His voice returns in Act III as that of a policeman.³⁸ He repeatedly states that he is just a "fonctionnaire". His prime concern is to operate a system for which he needs a pragmatic disregard for the lives and suffering of individuals. Béranger's repeated praise of him as a "complete" man is both mistaken and ironic: "on peut tout dire à un architecte, il comprend tout..." (TH II 124). Act I shows that "L'Administration" can hold off the killer for a while - "... il ne s'attaque pas à l'Administration" (TH II 140) - but in the end as the Architect admits "Nous sommes tous mortels" (TH II 149). Act I reiterates in dramatic form the 'tableau' in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser when Amédée opens the window and prepares to move the corpse, "l'horrible et le beau doivent coexister". The audience is shown the wonder of the visionary moment and the horror of death, the final irrationality of the human condition.

Bérenger differs from the Architect above all in his refusal to be indifferent and to turn away from unpleasant truth. "... mieux vaut tout connaître, mieux vaut tout connaître." (TH II 141); "... je ne puis demeurer indifférent" (TH II 143). This is Bérenger's dominant and abiding characteristic, symbolised by the fact that he does not possess a briefcase. All the other characters have briefcases containing different objects which represent the ways they deal with life and the ideas which they put between themselves and death. The refusal to be indifferent is closely related to Bérenger's visionary insight in as much as it represents the rejection of all palliatory media and a direct contact with reality. Bérenger characterises himself as someone aware of existence in a world full of "des êtres tristement neutres, nostalgiques sans nostalgies, comme inconscients, souffrant inconsciemment d'exister. Mais moi j'avais conscience du malaise de l'existence" (TH II 126). This awareness is the source of his desire for action.

The end of Act I leaves Bérenger about to take action against the grievous state of affairs to which he has just been a witness. "On ne peut pas, on ne doit pas laisser cela comme ça! Ça ne peut plus aller! Ça ne peut plus aller!" (TH II 149). Acts II and III plot the path of the man who rebels against the human condition and seeks truth. They depict the various obstacles he encounters in this quest – the problems of communicating with people of different beliefs or with people who see their only role in life as that of doing their duty for a system.

In Act II Bérenger's instinctive response is compared with a kaleidoscope of other attitudes. Before he returns to his room, there is an evocation of the lives and mentality of the "êtres tristement neutres". Almost returning to the style of the early plays, Ionesco uses only their disembodied voices and creates an atmosphere of alienation and dehumanisation. The various voices and "répliques" are not only used 'musically' to

create a sense of chaos but are also juxtaposed for comic effect: nonsense rubs shoulders with serious ideas, word play, parody of official jargon and cliché.

The concierge, normally an incarnation of the platitudinous in Ionesco's work, has tried using the Stoics' approach to life, contemplation. Her conclusion is "Ça ne sert à rien, finalement.... Il faut trouver chacun sa solution. S'il y en avait, mais y en a pas" (TH II 153). She believes also in stifling emotions because they are useless for day to day survival; "Qu'est-ce que j'en ferais, moi, pour balayer mon escalier?" (TH II 153).

The following series of short 'voice sketches' paints a picture of humanity as aggressive, irrational, greedy and distracted by trivia. As in his earliest plays Ionesco uses an excess of words and jargon, a sonorous pseudo-communication, to evoke an image of emptiness and to suggest how systems lose sight of their aims:

Voix venant de gauche: Avec nos contremaîtres, nos vice-maîtres, nos paramaîtres et nos périmaîtres, nous allons constituer une base organisationnelle, un comité de mise en commun.

Voix d'en haut: Les maîtres et périmaîtres constitueront des comités d'entreprise des sociétés d'entrepreneurs qui constitueront des groupes sociaux... (TH II 161).

When Béranger finally arrives home to find the sick, black-clad Édouard in his room, a more sustained juxtaposition ensues, this time between the rebel and the resigned person. Édouard may be seen to represent the Church, which depends on death for its raison d'être and bases its philosophy and ethics on the acceptance of death. "Mais c'est l'ordre du monde" (TH II 171), is Édouard's reaction to Béranger's refusal to accept "les choses horribles qui arrivent..." He chastises Béranger for his idealistic rebellion: "Vous êtes toujours à la recherche de choses extravagantes. Vous vous proposez des buts inaccessibles.... Il y a toujours eu en vous un mécontentement, un refus de vous résigner" (TH II

171). Édouard encourages Bérenger to see his visionary moment as an illusion or a dream but the latter will only go so far as to admit its ephemerality. The euphoria is real; the sense of having found a permanent solution is not:

J'ai vu, j'ai cru atteindre quelque chose... quelque chose comme un autre univers. Oui, seule la beauté peut faire s'épanouir les fleurs du printemps sans fin... les fleurs immortelles... hélas, ce n'était qu'une lumière mensongère!... De nouveau, de nouveau, cela s'est écroulé dans les abîmes... en une seconde, en une seconde. La même chute, qui se répète... (TH II 171).

The contrast between two visions of reality here is not the same as the contrasts found in Pirandello's work between lucid madman or mystic and the 'myopic' bourgeois trapped inside the inherited forms of perception. Ionesco is torn, it seems, between what the experience means to him and what it means in the cold light of reason. The naive idealist is deflated by the world-weary realist. The stage direction accompanying Bérenger's words just quoted says "Tout cela est dit d'un ton déclamatoire, à mi-chemin entre la sincérité et la parodie."

Bérenger's recent discovery of the killer leads him to assume that the killings are a new development, but Édouard states that the problem is known by everyone. He has made death a part of his world: "La chose est sue, assimilée, cataloguée" (TH II 173). This is neatly symbolised by the fact that he holds the killer's equipment inside his briefcase, a device which suggests that in accepting death the Church unwittingly exacerbates the evil in the world. Édouard is furthermore reluctant to re-examine the premises of his stance: "Je ne savais pas. Je ne sais jamais ce que j'ai, je ne regarde pas dans ma serviette" (TH II 181). This portrait is given an added nuance by the detail of Édouard's illness and shrivelled arm: a faith which embraces evil and is predicated on the Fall is a sick faith. There is a further suggestion that Édouard's illness is related to the killings in the "cité radieuse": Bérenger tells him "Après tout, ce sont

peut-être ces crimes affreux de la cité radieuse qui sont à l'origine de votre maladie. Cela a dû vous toucher, consciemment ou non" (TH II 175). Ionesco's ambivalent attitude to the Fall can be seen here. It is both something which is imposed on us automatically and something which we are doomed to perpetuate and to contribute to.

Édouard can also be seen as embodying some of the conflicts and contradictions in which the Church can find itself with regard to secular matters, especially politics. When Édouard is drawn into Mère Pipe's speech and joins the crowd in shouting "Vive la Mère Pipe!" (TH II 189-190) Ionesco is perhaps saying that resignation to death and the Fall is the first step towards being caught up in tyranny and ideological warfare - all the issues which he considers result when the human urge to unity is diverted into earthly ends. An acceptance of death and of the irrationality of human existence implies a refusal to challenge evil or to fight for a better world - a notion reinforced when Édouard has a coughing fit and nearly collapses but then refuses a drink offered to him by the Drunk, saying "Je ne veux pas être remonté" (TH II 194). He accepts his illness as fated and inevitable. The ambivalence of Édouard's stance is conveyed when he shouts "Nous allons tous mourir. C'est la seule aliénation sérieuse!" (TH II 194). Whilst not challenging the human condition, the Church nevertheless takes death seriously because it offers the chance for salvation in another world. Édouard colludes with both death and the status quo. There is a further suggestion that the Church, while recognising ideological evils is generally reluctant to translate that awareness into action: "Penser contre son temps c'est de l'héroïsme. Mais le dire, c'est de la folie" (TH II 195).

In Act III there are further brief portraits of attitudes to life and these also form the obstructions to Bérenger's quest. The background to the rather fragmented stage business is provided by the political meeting

during which Ionesco uses the grotesque, ranting figure of Mère Pipe to parody the word-mongering of ideology: "Pour tout changer il ne faut rien changer. On change les noms, on ne change pas les choses.... Pour désaliéner l'humanité il faut aliéner chaque homme en particulier..." (TH II 188). She epitomises the tendency of politics to seek the good of the 'whole' at the expense of the individual, as Ionesco sees it.

In the same way that Ionesco criticises his own attitudes by making Bérenger's declarations slightly parodic, in this scene we find a drunkard expressing some ideas reminiscent of those found in Notes et contre-notes. "Le héros combat son temps,..." recalls Ionesco's definition of the avant-garde artist as "l'opposant vis-à-vis du système existant" (NCN 178). Ionesco seems to be casting a critical eye back over his past solutions and formulae here. Having suggested that it is scientists and artists who change reality more radically than do politicians, the Drunkard is liquidated by Mère Pipe's geese. Ionesco would seem to be saying that anyone who has the power to change man's very perception of reality will be hindered by political machinery.

The ultimate similarity of all the various attitudes examined – apart from Bérenger's – is not only suggested by the resemblance between the Architect and the Second Policeman and their verbal echoes, but also by that between Mère Pipe and the Concierge of Act II. The comic business of the confusion of all the briefcases underlines the point: they are all interchangeable.

The comic but grotesque misuse of words in the Mère Pipe scene transmutes into a visual image of purposeless bustle, military automatism being expressed through verbal repetition and puppet-like movement. In the middle of this scene is the young soldier with the bunch of red carnations sitting idly on his lorry and observing the traffic jam. He would like to help the old man find his way but "je ne suis pas d'ici" (TH II 199). An

outsider in two senses, he can be seen as a contemplative visionary, who focuses on isolated objects, as Ionesco himself sometimes does. Although he is kind, the soldier is shown to be out of touch with the urgent problem which occupies Béranger. He is described as "très enfantin" and when Béranger asks him about the behaviour of the Police he replies "Je ne sais pas... moi, j'ai mes fleurs" (TH II 201). The facts that he is easily sent packing by the Second Policeman and that he himself is a soldier suggest that visionary contemplation too is an inadequate stance in the face of the Killer and is as good as collusion with the status quo. Once again Ionesco seems to be questioning the validity of one of his own tendencies.³⁹

Ionesco's stated aim in writing Tueur sans gages was to show "que tout allait mal dans l'indifférence générale" and the word "indifférence" recurs in the text.⁴⁰ The Killer clearly represents something more than the idea of death or "external" evil. Human beings are shown to co-operate with him. He does not attack them: they are attracted by him and by the Colonel's photograph. The Architect also refers to "la manie des victimes de toujours revenir sur les lieux du crime" (TH II 148). There is more evidence for man's collusion with the Killer in Act II when Béranger tells Edouard about the murders. He locates the problem within himself:

Savez-vous, il se passe des choses, des choses atroces dans le monde, dans notre ville, des choses terribles! inimaginables... tout près d'ici... relativement tout près... Moralement c'est ici-même, là ... (Il se frappe la poitrine...)" (TH II 170).

Then in Act III he reminds the Policeman that "Nous sommes tous responsables des crimes..." (TH II 205). Ionesco himself reinforces this aspect of the Killer in one of his interviews with Claude Bonnefoy, referring to the dimming of the light of the "cité radieuse" as representing "la chute", "le péché originel". But this is not so much the Biblical tasting of the tree of knowledge (though there is a suggestion of this in the way the victims crave the sight of the Colonel's photo) as Ionesco's private view

of the Fall as consisting in the loss of the ability to wonder and see the world in its purity. It is a succumbing to habit. Original sin for Ionesco is a flaw in perception: "c'est le péché originel, c'est-à-dire le faiblissement d'une intensité de l'attention, d'une force du regard; c'est-à-dire encore la perte de la faculté de s'émerveiller: l'oubli; la sclérose de l'habitude; le quotidien est une couverture grise sous laquelle on cache la virginité du monde;..." (ECB 31-2). In this sense then, sin is closely related to indifference which is a lack of reaction – as opposed to the stupor characteristic of a pure contact with the world.

By the end of Act III however, after Bérenger's long, solitary plea and address, the Killer has an added quality: he suggests the impenetrable irrationality and helplessness of the human condition. His external attributes reinforce the derisory impotence of words and reason; a shabbily-dressed, one-eyed dwarf with toes poking through his shoes – the essence of anticlimax. He has no language; he merely sniggers. Even more tantalising is the suggestion that there is no killer at all, that "Bérenger parle seul dans l'ombre" and addresses a mocking void (TH 211). It is tempting also to see the Killer's collection of objects for sale as the distractions of materialism, the "divertissements" (in the Pascalian sense of the word) which lure people into indifference and lead to premature death, the death of the soul, because they have lost sight of their true being. The photo of the Colonel bearing "une expression attendrissante" combines the protective father-figure with that of authority. It may be seen to represent the types of earthly authority in which people put their faith – military heroes, national and religious leaders. While the Colonel may stand for right-wing politics, Mère Pipe represents the Left. The Killer is then similar in type to the symbol of the cadaver in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser; neither stands for one precise thing. They refer both to aspects of the human condition imposed on men as well as to innate

human characteristics.

Until the last showdown with the Killer, Bérenger's attitude seems to be exemplary. His good will and concern stand out against the various types of indifference displayed by the other characters. Yet, at the end, awareness and concern are no weapons against the Killer. They are as ineffectual and futile as a faith in science or systems or visionary experience. Death penetrates even the "cité radieuse". The visionary experience ultimately has no metaphysical significance. The Killer remains "Insaissable" to the end. Nevertheless, Ionesco's ambiguous presentation of Bérenger as at once heroic and pathetic suggests that the best we can do is to face the Killer or the absurdity of life squarely because if we do not we are liable to be distracted from the reality of ourselves and reinforce absurdity.

The play begins with an experience of pure being and ends with a recognition of the inevitability of death. Ionesco has scrutinised his own position in Bérenger's attitudes and tested his own kind of absolutism against that of others. He is seen to be hemmed in on two fronts, refusing to participate in society or politics and yet realising that to opt out of these activities does not lead anywhere ultimately. The ending however is not totally black: although Bérenger has run out of arguments and puts down his "pistolets démodés" and kneels before the Killer, we are not witnesses to his demise. Moreover he has not found the killer in the same manner as the other victims and is not seen to suffer the ignominious end of being pushed into a pond whilst straining to see a picture. Bérenger goes to meet the killer in full awareness and this, relatively speaking, is something positive.

V Le Piéton de l'air

During his description of his visionary moment, the Béranger of Tueur sans gages states that "j'aurais certainement pu m'envoler ..." (TH II 130). The motif of flight forms the central image of Le Piéton de l'air and it is through this image that Ionesco conducts his definitive investigation of his "expérience de lumière". However, euphoric flight is not the only way of leaving the material 'here-and-now' which the play explores. In addition to the 'cosmic' beyond to which Béranger flies, the play also focuses on the "anti-monde" and the dream world – the other reality within man. The word "autre" in its positive sense of a release from the merely material or an expansion of reality recurs in the play.

The action takes place symbolically on the edge of a precipice, high up on a verdant plateau with a view across a valley and the stage must be designed "afin de permettre que le précipice soit près et que l'on se sente sur ses bords" (TH III 121). We are on the outer limits of reality here. The landscape of Ionesco's own visionary experience is clearly recognisable. The action takes place on a Sunday, further suggesting the relaxation of normal constraints and a time of meditation on other-worldly matters. The dream-beyond is also indicated in the set which should be based on the 'primitive' or naive painting of Rousseau, Utrillo or Chagall. Béranger's house and the landscape should "donner une ambiance de rêve" (TH III 121).

The play is both a follow-up to Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser – plotting what happens during the protagonist's flight – and a re-working of the themes of Tueur sans gages: human helplessness, the failure of the visionary experience and of reason in the face of the human condition. The image of the precipice is also therefore an indication of the fragility of man-made reality.

The themes may be familiar Ionescan themes but the tone of the play is a combination of former tones pushed to an extreme. Alongside genuine 'Angst' runs a thread of facetious, flippant humour, exemplified by the translation of the flight motif into a kind of circus act using bicycles and wires, accompanied by disparaging and inane comments from a crowd of English people. There are parodic references to other Ionesco plays and themes, and the writing is imbued with a brand of self-consciousness in places.⁴¹ It is as though the play anticipates its own impotence as an attempt to break into the beyond and possesses an awareness of its limited status as a verbal edifice. A strong vein of self-mockery – mockery both of the Ionesco double, Bérenger, and of Ionesco's ideas – suggests that Ionesco was acknowledging the impossibility of his stance at the very moment he sought to express it. There is a sense of rehearsing outworn arguments in which he would still like to believe but cannot. There is an embarrassment of ideas thrown out by a plethora of characters and few are followed up or discussed in any detail. It is as though Ionesco is checking his own other-worldly impulse by giving full rein to it early in the play only to demonstrate its impossibility later. In an interview with Françoise Varenne of Le Figaro, Ionesco declared "It is one of my pleasures to toy with what is most serious, even awesome."⁴² I would suggest that this playfulness is a result of the failure to give the visionary moment any transcendent significance.

There are two fundamental antitheses in the play. On the one hand there is that between the person with visionary sensibility and those who are more "terre à terre" – Joséphine (Bérenger's wife) and the crowd of English folk. The English setting allows Ionesco to draw not only on the English reputation for stolid propriety, politeness and prudery but also on the nostalgic myth of pastoral England. Secondly, both this element and the visionary theme are juxtaposed with the nightmare reality which

Bérenger glimpses on his flight. The quaint idealism of the setting refers ultimately to both the conventional English and to the experience of euphoria: by the end of the play both worlds have been shown up as flimsy in the light of the ultimate reality of the universe and the "abîmes illimités" beyond it.

The comic tone of the play's opening with its "franglais" word play and stage business "comme au Guignol" switches abruptly when Bérenger tells the journalist of his disillusionment with literature. He used to be able to write in spite of his "nihilisme fondamental" but he has been convinced by his own message that "il n'y avait rien à dire". He wanted literature to be "un passage vers autre chose":

Journaliste: Vers quelle autre chose?

Bérenger: Si je pouvais le savoir, le problème serait résolu (TH III 126).

This is essentially what the play investigates.

The crisis which Bérenger goes on to describe is very similar to the one which affected Ionesco himself between 1959 and 1961, which was a combination of disillusion with the theatre and a sense that any message in his work was destined to become an oppressive ideology. Here Bérenger explains that his silence is a rebellion against the present and against History:⁴³

Il faut du discernement et du courage intellectuel ou une intuition lucide pour pouvoir s'opposer à ce qui est et prévoir ce qui sera, ou simplement sentir que quelque chose d'autre devrait être (TH III 126).

Like his author, Bérenger hopes that his work will contain a hidden message, a kernel of truth beyond any conscious, potentially ideological message. He would like his texts to have a 'beyond':

J'espère cependant que derrière mon message apparent, il y aura autre chose, quelque chose que je ne connais pas encore mais qui se dévoilera peut-être ... de lui-même... dans la fiction... (TH III 127).

If this notion of letting reality speak on its own through the medium of an author is reminiscent of Pirandello, Béranger's other worries are more obviously so, concerning the inability of art to embrace life in its fullness through 'form':

Je me demande également si la littérature et le théâtre peuvent vraiment rendre compte de l'énorme complexité du réel,.... jamais la littérature n'a eu la puissance, l'acuité, la tension de la vie; aujourd'hui encore moins. Pour être égale à la vie, la littérature devrait être mille fois plus atroce, plus terrible. (TH II 127).

He is 'blocked' by the ineffability of reality - "elle ne peut même plus être saisie par la conscience..." - and also by his awareness of death: "C'est une vérité qu'on oublie ... afin de pouvoir faire quelque chose." (TH III 128) - a sentiment both Pirandellian and mystical in its suggestion that whole-hearted participation in life requires a slumbering consciousness. This play has then a certain Pirandellian self-consciousness, displaying its own inadequacy and limitations at the same time as it attempts to fulfil an aim: "Comment faire pour que la littérature soit une exploration intéressante?" (TH III 128). The visionary quest in this play is therefore both a philosophical one and a literary one. Yet much of this serious exposition by Béranger is 'punctuated' by comic interjections from the Journalist - "J'enregistre: on ne peut plus enregistrer." - and at the end of the interview Béranger shows a normal human interest in publicity and remuneration. "En première page. Avec photo, s'il vous plaît" (TH III 128).

The encounter between Béranger and the Journalist is one of the longest and most realistic in the play. It provides a kind of 'theoretical' background or unifying key to the subsequent action, much of which is fragmented, parodic or downright nonsensical. It is immediately followed by a scene of oneiric suggestion, in which it emerges that Joséphine's father has not died during the war, but is about to return alive into the

midst of his own funeral arrangements. A bomber plane, "un rescapé de la dernière guerre", reduces Béranger's cottage to a heap of smoking ruins. Béranger escapes thanks to a sudden urge to "marcher dans l'herbe fraîche..." (TH III 133). The news of Joséphine's father turns out to be a disturbing dream. The 'bombing' can be seen as the intrusion of an external reality on the inner world of the individual – whether Joséphine's nightmare or Béranger's metaphysical anguish. The plane reinforces the sense of being on the edge of reality by showing the fragility and uncertainty of life; it is almost a parody of the Absurd moment of disintegration. This pattern recurs in the play: the human world is constantly overshadowed by inscrutable and uncontrollable forces beyond it. Joséphine's nightmare encounter with mortality anticipates Béranger's confrontation with 'limits' at the end of the play.

Discussion of the themes of bereavement and dream is delayed by a scene of flippant talk from the English group and by some irrelevant exchanges about Joséphine's clothes. Dream is evoked by Béranger as a source of truth – a difficult truth which the mind cannot contemplate during the day:

Le jour nous oublions. Nous n'y pensons pas. Si nous avions tout le temps la conscience pénétrante que nous avons dans nos rêves, nous ne pourrions plus vivre. La nuit, on se souvient. Le jour, c'est fait pour oublier (TH III 137).

His advice to Joséphine is to turn her thoughts outwards to the landscape, to "les bois de l'autre côté de la vallée" and in visionary fashion to focus on the beauty of the present, of the white walls of the houses and of the grass.

Another fragmented 'choric' sequence follows with many of the exchanges between characters lasting only for a few lines before attention is transferred to another group. Although the subject matter of these snatches of conversation is serious – death, depression, changing one's

life – and often echoes Ionesco's notebooks, the tone and the manner of presentation is almost desultory and perfunctory. The First Englishman talks of his insomnia and sense of alienation in rather Pirandellian terms – "J'ai vécu une vie qui était celle d'un autre" – and of his decision to change everything:⁴⁴

1^{er} Anglais: J'ai perdu ma vie à me proposer de vouloir la changer. Je me disais, la nuit, dans mes insomnies: "demain, je casse tout et je change."

.....

II^e Anglais: Avez-vous tenu votre promesse?

1^{er} Anglais: Le matin, en me réveillant, je la tenais encore... Mais après le breakfast, j'étais trop alourdi. Je remettais au lendemain. (TH III 139-40).

Underneath the joke about the heaviness of the English breakfast there may be suggestions that we are often distracted from important issues by small material things, and that change requires detachment and euphoria – "alourdi" being the Ionescan term for being weighed down by the earthly and the physical.

It is during this scene that one of the few character clashes in the play emerges. Béranger, as the first scene established, is the character who seeks to break out of the human world and to reach toward the beyond. Joséphine's role in the play is to challenge Béranger's other-worldly tendency and 'demystify' his euphoria. She fails to see the 'Passant de l'Antimonde', whose appearance sets Béranger off on an evocation of a cosmos consisting of many universes which intersect and co-exist:

Béranger: Il n'y a pas qu'un anti-monde. Il y a plusieurs univers, imbriqués les uns dans les autres.

Marthe: Combien y en a-t-il?

Béranger: Il y en a des quantités et des quantités. Un nombre indéterminé de quantités. Ces mondes s'interpénètrent, se superposent, sans se toucher, car ils peuvent coexister dans le même espace.

Josephine: Comment cela? (TH III 146).

Bérenger can only offer the proof that the "anti-monde" exists because the idea of it exists in the human mind, though later he cites as evidence "des preuves de langage", notions which Ionesco himself explores in his writings.⁴⁵

By now Bérenger is in full flow, offering rather Jarryesque descriptions of the mechanisms of reality. He is so confident that he understands the beyond that when a flowered column suddenly materialises before the family he launches upon a description of the "néant" and has clearly recovered from the depression of the first scene. His theories have two possible sources, as Ronald Hayman rightly points out: 'Pata-physics and Buddhism.'⁴⁶ They have the mock scientific tone and the paradoxes and batty logic of Jarry's metaphysical science (though they lack the quality of Jarry's writing to be outrageous and convincing at the same time). Bérenger's notions that the emptiness of this world becomes a positive nothingness on the other side of the "néant" is not only similar to the Buddhist view of the universe but is also a variation of the path from Absurdity to Mysticism: dissolution is a prelude to reintegration in the whole:

Vois-tu, ces palais défunts dont témoignent les ruines seront entièrement dissous, bien sûr, mais peut-être, peut-être - et là est tout l'espoir - après avoir traversé le néant, tout sera-t-il reconstruit, restauré, de l'autre côté; à l'envers, certes, puisque c'est de l'autre côté. (TH III 152).

Joséphine continues to resist Bérenger's pseudo-science and becomes irritated by his fanciful explanations. Their daughter, Marthe, by contrast, is fascinated. It is possible to see the relationship between the members of the family in terms of the facets of the mind: Marthe as the child, Bérenger as the visionary and Joséphine as reason.⁴⁷ The moment when Joséphine reads and enters Bérenger's mind would seem to support this, suggesting perhaps that reason poses a threat to the visionary consciousness (TH III 154).

Joséphine's role as reason becomes clearer when Béranger is filled with "Divine griserie." He accepts his joy at face value because his intuition tells him that it is valid: "Je suis enivré de certitude", he cries. "Quelle certitude?" is Joséphine's immediate response (TH III 156). She insists on precision but Béranger refuses to explain because "une certitude limitée n'en est plus une, puisqu'elle a des frontières, puisqu'elle est menacée par ce qui la nie" (TH III 156).⁴⁸ Here the contrast between the person who narrows down reality and the one who opens it out to embrace wider areas is quite explicit. Joséphine advises him to re-read Descartes – the epitome of intellectual enquiry – but he insists that his euphoria is not to be analysed, "Je serais moins heureux si je comprenais" (TH III 157). A gap gradually opens up between the two; Joséphine no longer understands his words and accuses him of being childish.

The appearance of the luminous silver bridge compounds Béranger's joy. When the journalist asks Béranger about the bridge Joséphine, defending him, associates him with fluidity: "il ne s'y connaît pas en constructions" (TH III 158). A further Pirandellian note is struck when Béranger's euphoria and levitation lead to him being labelled "mad" by the English crowd and later by Joséphine too.⁴⁹

Following another flippant exchange on the attitudes of different nations towards bridges, Ionesco characteristically has one of the English people suggest that the utilitarian spirit puts blinkers on perception – "La conscience de l'utilité est destructrice." (TH III 160) – that all things would be luminous if we ceased to see them solely in terms of their practical uses.⁵⁰

In the same way that Béranger views dream as a contact with truth, he sees his euphoria as eternal, and as comprising the rediscovery of a faculty temporarily lost: "une de ces joies oubliées, oubliées et pourtant bien connues, comme une chose qui s'appartient de toute éternité, que l'on

perd tous les jours et qui cependant ne se perd jamais. La preuve, c'est qu'on la retrouve, qu'on la reconnaît" (TH III 155-6). And later he cries jubilantly "J'ai retrouvé le moyen, le moyen oubliée"(TH III 165). In the ensuing discussion between the rationalists and the instinctive people, the gift of flight - the ability to transcend the earthly and the utilitarian - is seen as a faculty and a need which modern man has lost because he has over-valued reason and science:

Voler est un besoin indispensable à l'homme. (...) C'est une faculté innée. (...) C'est simple, pourtant, lumineux, enfantin. Quand on ne vole pas, c'est pire que si nous étions privés de nourriture. C'est pour cela sans doute que nous nous sentons malheureux (TH III 166).

Flight becomes a metaphor for religious experience or the ability to detach oneself from the material and contemplate the transcendental.⁵¹ When the Journalist points out that science has enabled man to fly, Béranger replies that it does in fact cut man off from an innate, natural ability: in a plane it is the machine which flies not the pilot. Béranger insists that flight is as easy as breathing and is a matter of will and faith. He goes on to make a plea for us to re-discover the original impulse to fly which lies behind the development of technology: "L'engin remplace l'homme et ses fonctions. Retrouvons la fonction authentique à travers ses déformations" (TH III 171).⁵² Ionesco seems to be suggesting here that the impulse behind science is essentially the same as that behind religion: they are both unitarian urges which aim to conquer the material. It is their means which are different.

Using a bicycle, then various pieces of circus equipment, Béranger shows the sceptical Joséphine and the English crowd how to fly. Although he uses equipment, his commentary explains that what is happening is really an inner event and in the end he abandons external aids.

... tu t'accroches à une branche imaginaire, comme l'on fait pour grimper à un arbre. Ensuite, tu te soulèves par la force des poignets, tu attrapes une autre branche un peu plus avant. Et de

branche fictive en branche fictive, tu grimpes. Tu peux monter tant que tu veux. Car l'arbre imaginaire est à la hauteur de ton désir. Il est même infini, si tu le veux.... Une force vous pousse; on ne sent plus du tout son poids. Une main suffit pour l'escalade. Un doigt. Puis seulement la pensée (TH III 174).

Gradually Béranger leaves the ground and material things behind until his exaltation sends him flying off out of sight. The Second Old English Lady notes that the direction of his course is determined not by mechanical factors but by his "regard" – his sight or look. While the flying scene is based closely on Ionesco's experiences of euphoria and contains many of the features of visionary experience, Ionesco's treatment of it is very different from that in Tueur sans gages. Joséphine's down-to-earth comments are accompanied by the banalities and disapproval of the English crowd for the unseemly show of exuberance. "Il ne faut pas sauter comme ça, ce n'est pas bien élevé" (TH III 162). When Béranger flies off out of sight his path is comically indicated by the crowd turning round or turning their heads simultaneously from side to side.

While Béranger is away visiting the beyond, Joséphine has a series of nightmares. Happening to the character who has consistently put forward a rational view of life, they further suggest the fragility of the everyday world. The presence of a female figure with a problematic inner life is a new departure in Ionesco's work, as is the family unit. Although Ionesco had always claimed that his anguish is that of all people, he had never before shown this in his dramatic structures. Joséphine feels alone and abandoned: "Je suis minuscule dans ce monde énorme. Je suis une fourmi égarée, affolée, qui cherche ses compagnes" (TH III 180). Just as the male protagonists of Victimes du devoir, Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser and La Soif et la faim experience a feeling of guilt which they cannot explain, so Joséphine has to undergo a trial for an unknown crime. The nightmares focus on death and culminate in a "Grand Homme Blanc" offering Joséphine an early death. Despite the Kafkaesque and apocalyptic atmosphere

("Lueurs rouges et sanglants;..") the scene possesses the ambiguity of tone which is typical of the play as a whole. Joséphine repulses the "Grand Homme Blanc" with "une politesse mondaine" as though he were seducing her. The stage directions ask for "cauchemar et salon" (TH III 188). Throughout the scene the child-visionary, Marthe, encourages her mother to see the dream as a mere projection of her own fear, not an absolute reality. But just as it ends, the images of the backcloth of the stage carry on the apocalyptic mood - "quelques ruines fumantes, une cathédrale, un volcan qui fume" - then Bérenger's anguished voice is heard: "Je vois, hélas! je vois tout. Plus d'espoir" (TH III 190). While Joséphine has been experiencing inner hell - guilt and visions of death - Bérenger has seen the outer hell and returned "tout déconfit". When asked "Qu'as-tu donc vu de l'autre côté?" he evokes a terrible vision of human and animal depravity, tyranny, cruelty and primal chaos:

J'ai vu les couteaux, j'ai vu des tombeaux... (...)
Joséphine: Mais ailleurs, mais ailleurs...

Bérenger: Ailleurs, la terre craque... Les montagnes s'effondrent, des océans de sang... de la boue, du sang, de la boue...(....) Des gouffres sans fond, les bombardements, les bombardements, des gouffres sans ^{se} creusaient sur des plaines depuis longtemps déjà ravagées et désertes (TH III 195-6).

He went, he says, to the meeting-point of time and space and saw only cosmic flux, fire and ice.⁵³ Joséphine wants to be flown off beyond this Hell but Bérenger tells them that "Après, il n'y a plus rien" (TH III 197). So all the other-worldly exuberance of early in the play - the semi-Buddhist, semi-'Pataphysical theory of reunion on the other side of the "néant" is shown up as mere verbal fireworks, just as Joséphine's pragmatic, rational approach to life is revealed as untenable because it ignores the irrational and ineffable. The visionary moment was first presented as a solution to Joséphine's anguish and then as a way out of alienation. Finally it is revealed as a metaphysical dead end.

Ionesco indulges his sense of the other-worldly at the same time as he mocks it through comedy, finally suggesting that although it is possible to pass beyond the human world and "leave the earth", this is no guarantee of any truly transcendental experience beyond the physical and material. While it is implied that the visionary experience has no metaphysical status, the play does not undermine the value of it entirely. The moment is not undermined in the name of a materialistic or rationalistic philosophy because this approach too is shown to be inadequate in the face of both human anguish and the chaos of the universe. Although Bérenger returns from his flight a broken man, it is Marthe who has the last words and these are of hope, and end on the paradise motif "... peut-être les abîmes se rempliront... peut-être que ... les jardins... les jardins..." (TH III 198). Whether this is intended to represent the durability of human hope against all odds, and is ironic in the light of what has just occurred, or whether the hope is genuine, is not clear. Given the ambiguity of the treatment of the visionary moment in the play as a whole, it would seem plausible to suggest that Ionesco is struggling between his intellectual and his intuitive response to it.

There is however another indication that the value of visionary experience lies elsewhere than in a guarantee of metaphysical existence. One of Joséphine's dreams involves a small boy running towards a wall which he tries to scale. He is pursued by John Bull who reprimands him for wanting to escape. The boy replies "Je voulais me promener dans la lumière. Je voulais beaucoup de ciel" (TH III 181). But John Bull's lesson is that light is only meaningful to the person who is imprisoned in darkness, that is, that the visionary moment has value only in opposition to imprisonment in matter. Its value is one of liberation. In itself, as a permanent state, it is meaningless. Bérenger's journey implies that the visionary moment should not be pursued in its own right but should be

accepted uncritically for what it is: a momentary liberation from earthly matters. The notion, which echoes the attitudes of Pirandello's Ludovico Nota (Vestire gli ignudi) and Memmo Speranza (Ma non è una cosa seria) is expressed also in Journal en miettes:

Et puis, tout à coup, donc, cette joie dont je ne peux rien dire, sauf qu'elle est insensée. Mais il faut l'accepter comme insensée, admettre que tout bonheur ne peut être qu'insensé, mais le vivre intensément.... Cette fois-ci, c'est comme si j'avais compris que la joie est un don du ciel, elle est comme la grâce, inexplicable, mais évidente, certaine (JM 136).

The attitude suggested by the play would seem then to be the one described by Bérenger before he flies off: "Moi, je veux rester un piéton de terre et un piéton de l'air" (TH III 181). The play therefore reasserts the Manichaeian or dual nature of the universe as Ionesco has always seen it. In other words, that the world consists of two mutually exclusive domains, one of darkness (material existence, mud, heaviness) and one of light.⁵⁴

There is further evidence for seeing the play as advocating the need for both views. It comes, like the John Bull and the little boy episode, in one of the seemingly autonomous fragments of dialogue. This fragment occurs near the beginning of the play and is not subsequently followed up explicitly. In retrospect it can be seen to be a comment on Bérenger's rejection of reality: the solution is not found in washing one's hands of the world altogether:

Journaliste: Il y a l'homme contemplatif: celui-là veut s'accorder au monde. Il y a l'homme d'action: celui-ci veut accorder le monde à lui-même. Quelle est la bonne solution?

John Bull: Il faut que l'homme et le monde y mettent chacun du leur. Que chacun fasse un pas vers l'autre (TH III 142).

This solution is not explained in any detail but it is in keeping with the rest of the play in its rejection of a one-sided approach to reality and in its suggestion that a double perspective is necessary.

The thread of flippant humour continues to the end of the play. Bérenger's account of his vision is in a Rabelaisian style which provokes

the English crowd to take their children hastily home to tea. In the récit the mockery of the euphoria is even more pronounced: the gates of Paradise have the words "Paradis" written on them "en lettres lumineuses, comme à Battersea" (LPC 82), and the "divine griserie" is evoked in the plainest physical terms:

Cette allégresse est physique, concrète, localisée, si bien qu'on peut la situer exactement entre le plexus où elle naît et les épaules qu'elle atteint après avoir gonflé les poumons d'un air plus subtil que l'air. Ses vapeurs vous montent dans la bouche, pénètrent les narines, arrivent au cerveau. Divine griserie" (LPC 69).

Some of this verbal mockery in the récit is translated into circus tricks and action in the play.

Although Le Piéton de l'air shares the central theme of Tueur sans gages it was much less successful on the stage. Tueur sans gages is constructed around the oneiric antithesis "évanescence"/"lourdeur". Le Piéton de l'air is based solely on images of light and euphoria. It can be seen as Ionesco's most sustained exploration of this pole, of his sensibility and is more complex than the isolated monologue representing this in Tueur sans gages. The visionary moment is fully integrated into the play, being not only the main theme but also the focus of the dialogue and the source of the physical action. However, more important than the lack of a strong poetic contrast is the lack of an antagonist. Without conflict there can be no real drama in Bérenger's discovery of the limits of euphoria and of human helplessness and imprisonment. Tueur sans gages comprises the same discovery but here the human condition is personified by the Killer, the pursuit of whom provides the main impulse for the plot. While the broad movement of Tueur sans gages is towards ever increasing constriction, that of Le Piéton de l'air is one of opening out. Whereas the inherent lack of drama in the motif of light was not important for the récit, it is a palpable flaw in the play. Ionesco was aware of the lack of

theatricality in his dream of levitation but surprisingly it was precisely this which tempted him to put it in play form:

Le Piéton de l'air, ce n'est pas du théâtre, c'est même le contraire du théâtre, et puisque c'est le contraire du théâtre, essayons donc d'en faire du théâtre.... Il y avait eu déjà l'émerveillement, l'étonnement devant l'existence: partant de ces états d'esprit, cela supposait faire du théâtral avec du non théâtral comme dans La Cantatrice chauve. Comment faire du théâtre avec Le Piéton de l'air, avec un bonhomme qui s'envole, des histoires que racontent des gens qui passent au lieu qu'il y ait des conflits simples et présents? C'est cela qui m'a tenté (ECB 64).

Ionesco himself insists that Le Piéton de l'air is dramatic in an unusually profound sense. He even maintains that the Absurd predicament which it expresses is "la situation dramatique dans sa vérité originelle" (ECB 65). It may be objected that a dramatic situation does not necessarily contain a dramatic plot.

As Ionesco points out in Entretiens avec Claude Bonnefoy, Le Piéton de l'air had a 'double' birth. First it was a dream, a spontaneous product of his mind, then overlying this he added a conscious element:

... à l'origine de ce conte, il y a d'une part un rêve, rêve de libération, de puissance et, d'autre part, une critique, une satire, une description réaliste de la vie de cauchemar dans les régimes totalitaires, une prophétie de malheur.... Je suis parti à la fois d'un rêve et d'une pensée consciente. Le rêve c'est le monsieur qui s'envole. La partie consciente, c'est ce qu'il voit grâce à cet envol" (ECB 63).

It is possible then that somehow these two types of creation failed to work together in this particular play.

A comparison between the récit and the play reveals that Ionesco altered the basic plot very little in the dramatic transformation, although some of the extraneous material is considerably elaborated. The one substantial element added in the play is Joséphine's dream sequence during Bérenger's flight. This, while it contains some powerful confrontations and is more dramatic than Bérenger's verbose account of his vision, has the same fragmented quality of much of the earlier writing in the play so that unless its links with the rest of the material are clear it can appear as a

mere time-filler while Béranger makes his journey to the beyond. But because Ionesco failed to provide a more solid dramatic basis for his play the fragmented scenes and the gimmicky jokes give an impression of hollowness. What is missing is a strong subtext. As Ronald Hayman remarks, "All this dialogue is rather like what Chekhov might have written if he had not been able to write."⁵⁵ A further addition to the récit is the hopeful note sounded by Marthe at the end of the play to counterbalance Béranger's despondency. This comes over as an ambivalent attempt at an 'open' definition of the visionary experience, as though Ionesco does not want to rule out any interpretative option.

Ionesco cannot provide or find any rational basis for his visionary experiences yet he cannot cease scrutinising them. The inevitable impasse into which his investigations lead him means that his work emerges as a set of variations on a theme.⁵⁶ Ionesco constantly juggles and plays with the same elements of his inner world, giving prominence now to one, now to another. Sometimes they are used poetically and musically like leitmotifs and other times they constitute the theme and backbone of a plot.

NOTES

¹ See ANT 333: "Ainsi, c'est bien dans l'éblouissement face au monde, dans l'étonnement devant la merveille du monde et dans la joie d'inventer que j'ai trouvé les raisons fondamentales, consciemment, mi-consciemment, ou inconsciemment, de l'écriture, de la création artistique."

² For example: Michel Lioure, "L'imagination matérielle dans l'oeuvre de Eugène Ionesco", Colloque de Cérisy, Ionesco: situation et perspectives, (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1980), p.117.

Rosette C. Lamont, "Air and Matter: Ionesco's Le Piéton de l'air and Victimes du devoir", French Review 38 (Jan 1965), pp.349-361.

Mary Ann Witt, "Eugène Ionesco and the dialectic of space", Modern Language Quarterly, 33 (September 1972), 312-326.

Richard Schechner, "The Inner and Outer Reality", Tulane Drama Review, 7, 3 (Spring 1963), pp.187-217.

³ See ANT 316: "C'est-à-dire que dans mes pièces de théâtre ou dans ma prose, j'ai le sentiment d'effectuer une exploration, à tâtons dans la nuit, dans une forêt sombre. Je ne sais pas où j'arriverai ou si j'arriverai quelque part, j'écris sans plan."

⁴ Rosette Lamont is the only critic to date to attempt to analyse Ionesco's last two plays in any detail and significantly she is obliged to draw very heavily on her personal knowledge of the author and on information not available in the text and therefore not to an audience. A production of Voyages chez les morts in London in 1987 drew the following remarks: "Ionesco reduces the country of the shades to a prolonged family get-together. In itself that would not matter. The real trouble is that Ionesco lacks the fundamental dramatic ability to relate his own spiritual crisis to ours." (Michael Billington, Guardian, 17th January 1987). Irving Wardle in Times on the 16th of January notes how the creative imagination in old age has a tendency to "narrow into autobiography and attempt a final squaring of accounts with the personal fears and long-dead companions that previously formed a secret source of power. ... All too often, the effect of dragging the skeletons into the light of day robs them of their former potency; and such is the case with this late Ionesco piece..."

⁵ See JM 24: "lorsque je donne libre cours à l'imagination déchaînée, à la construction imaginative, ... je ne suis plus seulement moi mais je suis tous les autres.." (Ionesco's emphasis). (See also ANT 316, LPC 218 and 199, DEC 81.)

⁶ See NCN 219: "je tâche d'être témoin objectif dans ma subjectivité." Also ECB 70, 77, 157, 170, 174; NCN 41-2.

⁷ See PPPP 224-5.

⁸ ECB 16.

⁹ See MN I 380 for Giuncano's account.

¹⁰ ECB 32; JM 97; PPPP 225, 230, 238; HQ 22.

¹¹ Compare MN II 472 and TR 1411-12.

¹² PPPP 253: "Le monde était neuf et familier..."; JM 97: "Tout devenait à la fois profondément réel et profondément irréel". "Un monde que la lumière dissolvait et qu'elle reconstituait."

¹³ See NCN 23: "... l'importance de l'oeuvre dépendra de la densité des interrogations devenues vie, ..." Also DEC 15-16.

¹⁴ Ross Chambers, "Eugène Ionesco ou comment s'envoler", Australian Journal of French Studies, VI, 1, (Jan-April 1969), p.87.

¹⁵ Mosche Lazar, ed., The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theatrical Quest, (Udena Publications: Malibu 1982, p.VII). James, Varieties of Religious Experience, p.35.

¹⁶ ECB 174: "Dans Journal en miettes, dans mes pièces, mais dans L'Homme aux valises plus que dans mes autres pièces, j'ai essayé de bannir la littérature et de ne relater que les images pures, précises, du rêve. J'ai procédé un peu avec mes rêves comme ont procédé avec la réalité extérieure les écrivains qui ont fait du roman objectal." See also ECB 72-3, 170 and JM 191.

¹⁷ Also ECB 12: "J'accorde beaucoup d'importance au rêve parce qu'il me donne une vision un peu plus aiguë, plus pénétrante de moi-même. Rêver c'est penser et c'est penser d'une façon beaucoup profonde, plus vraie, plus authentique parce que l'on est comme replié sur soi-même."

¹⁸ Also NCN 167: "Nos rêves ne sont-ils pas les mêmes? Ne révèlent-ils pas nos angoisses communes, nos désirs communs?"

¹⁹ See also PPPP 256. Compare Traherne's Third Century of the Meditations: "All things were spotless and pure and glorious: yea, and infinitely mine, and joyful and precious.... All Time was Eternity, and a perpetual Sabbath. Is it not strange, that an infant should be heir of the whole World, and see those mysteries which the books of the learned never unfold?" (Happold, p.369). See also Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality".

²⁰ The figure of Gurdulú in Calvino's Il cavaliere inesistente comes to mind here. He is without self-consciousness or awareness - "uno che c'è ma non sa d'esserci". Instead of using words to mediate between himself and the world, he unites with whatever he sees - imitating ducks, pear trees - and giving himself over to the objects of the world. "pareva rotolarsi in mezzo alle cose esistenti soddisfatto come un puledro che vuol grattarsi la schiena;...". Possessing no sense of self, he naturally has a multiplicity of names and will answer to any name. "Si direbbe che i nomi gli scorrono addosso senza mai riuscire ad appiccicarglisi." (Quotes from the Einaudi edition (Torino, 1959), pp.32, 33, 34.)

²¹ This is borne out by Ionesco's comments on his writing processes. See NCN 42, 212-3, 274.

²² Also ANT 314-5: "Une des raisons principales pour lesquelles j'écris, sans doute, c'est pour retrouver le merveilleux de mon enfance au-delà du quotidien, la joie au-delà du drame, la fraîcheur au-delà de la

dureté.... c'est pour retrouver cette beauté, intacte dans la boue, que je fais de la littérature. Tous mes livres, toutes mes pièces sont un appel, l'expression d'une nostalgie, je cherche un trésor enfoui dans l'océan, perdu dans la tragédie de l'histoire. Ou si vous voulez, c'est la lumière que je cherche et qu'il m'arrive de sembler retrouver de temps à autre."

²³ By, for example, Roger Cardinal in Expressionism (London: Granada, Paladin Movements and Ideas, 1984), p.8. Also by Germaine Brée, in "Ionesco's Later Plays: Experiments in Dramatic Form". In The Two Faces of Ionesco, ed. R.C. Lamont and M.J. Friedman (Troy, N.Y.: Whitson Publishing Company, 1978), pp.101-118.

²⁴ Brée, p.110.

²⁵ Ibid., p.113.

²⁶ Ibid., p.107.

²⁷ Ibid., p.110.

²⁸ Ibid., p.115.

²⁹ The sinister aspect of the life calls a reptilian metaphor to Pirandello's pen too: MN I 325.

³⁰ TH I 180, 181, 182. See PPPP 28 for Ionesco's mother's suicide threat. NCN 181 for the Parisian street scene.

³¹ ECB 72.

³² The witnessing of a suicide jumping off a bridge or the failure to rescue a drowning person seems to have become a sort of leitmotif in modern literature: Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment, Part Two Chapter 6; Pirandello's novella "E due!", NA I 199 (echoed partially in Il fu Mattia Pascal); Camus' La Chute; also in Ionesco's La Soif et la faim.

³³ Interview given by Ionesco to A.S. in Combat (26 February 1959), p.2.

³⁴ Strother B. Purdy in "A reading of Ionesco's The Killer", Modern Drama, 10 (1967-8), pp.416-423, notes that Tueur sans gages is "a group of symbolic correspondences", several of which have been identified by critics, "but there has not yet been an attempt to bring them all together and show that they make sense, or "order together". Purdy then attempts this synthesis but still does not account for all the details. It may be then that the play consists of a number of symbolic correspondences which do not coalesce to form an organic whole.

³⁵ Schechner, "The Inner and Outer Reality", p.208.

³⁶ See NCN 230, and JM 146.

³⁷ The desire to unify the inner and outer worlds is a constant theme in Adamov's "L'Aveu" too: "Il est temps; je dois m'éveiller. M'éveiller, ouvrir les yeux, ouvrir mon coeur, ouvrir ma tête, m'ouvrir à tout ce qui m'est extérieur, jusqu'à l'instant où intérieur et extérieur ne feront plus qu'un" (p.28).

38 Like the Architect the Second Policeman is only concerned with his small area. The killer "n'est pas mon rayon". His sole concern is the functioning of the system: "Le salut public? On s'en occupe. Quand on a le temps. La circulation d'abord." (TH II 206).

39 See for example ANT 323: "Une seule issue peut-être. C'est encore la contemplation l'émerveillement devant le fait existentiel,..."

40 Interview given to A.S. in Combat, 26/2/59.

41 The Little English Girl has her hair pulled by the Little Boy and is revealed as "la petite cantatrice chauve" (p.135); the fragmented conversation between the two English women echoes the beginning of Tueur sans gages (p.141). A further exchange between the two deliberately breaks the dramatic illusion: "Il était noir, noir, noir. Vous ne pouvez pas savoir combien il était noir. Noir comme la neige à Londres. Cette expression n'est pas de l'auteur" (p.142).

42 Quoted by Rosette Lamont in "L'Homme aux valises: Ionesco's absolute stranger", The Two Faces of Ionesco, p.247.

43 "History" for Ionesco implies the contingent and material; 'Existence' as opposed to 'Being'. In JM 59, the visionary experience is defined as being "hors de l'Histoire..."

44 "C'è qualcuno che sta vivendo la mia vita. Io non ne so nulla". Taccuino 1933-1934 quoted in the Almanacco Letterario Bompiani (Milano) 1938, p.16.

45 See NCN 299; PPPP 75; DEC 44.

46 Ronald Hayman, Eugène Ionesco (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp.84-87.

47 On occasions the manner in which Ionesco's characters interact creates the impression that they are not so much characters (i.e. imitating human beings of the real world) as poles or forces within a single consciousness. The couples in plays such as Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser, Le Piéton de l'air and La Soif et la faim, can be seen to represent different aspects of the author's personality. This is most obvious in Le Roi se meurt where the two Queens put forward opposing views of life. Ionesco externalises his own conflicting impulses in his characters.

48 Compare HQ 24: "toute explication vous enferme dans une définition."

49 TH III 161, 167, 176.

50 TH III 160. The argument is very reminiscent of the attitude of the beggar in Pirandello's "La mano del malato povero" who deliberately sits the wrong way round on a chair in order to break through the rigid meanings which habits and practical exigences have imposed on the luminous multiplicity of reality.

51 The metaphor is used by St. John of the Cross to express his quest for God in the poem "Otras del mismo a lo divino", Campbell's translation, p.38.

52 The same idea is found in Pirandello's "Canta l'Epistola" and Uno, nessuno e centomila.

53 Fire is an ambiguous image in Ionesco's work. He uses it to evoke primal chaos and death and yet in his descriptions of visionary moments it is associated with the divine or sacred. It is a common image in mystical writings.

54 The fundamental dogma of all Manichaeen sects is that the soul is divine and is imprisoned in created forms or terrestrial matter (Night), from whence it aspires to return to the Light. Saint Tobi notes that "Toute l'oeuvre de Ionesco se trouve sous le signe de l'antithèse entre le paradis et l'enfer: il y a chez lui un dialogue contradictoire ininterrompu entre ces deux mondes ou à proprement parler, entre ces deux visions du monde", Eugène Ionesco ou à la recherche du paradis perdu, (Paris: Gallimard nrf, 1973), p.199.

55 Hayman, p.82.

56 ECB 175: "Avec mes rêves, mes obsessions, j'ai fait finalement comme beaucoup d'écrivains, j'ai toujours parlé de la même chose. C'est pourquoi dans tout ce que j'ai écrit il y a continuité, identité."

CHAPTER 5

THE MYSTIC WAY

The visionary moment in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco is seen to reveal an 'other' dimension, whether within the mind or in external reality, which is felt to be an authentic, absolute reality. The force of the revelation reveals the factitiousness of conventional reality and can lead to the dilemma of whether to participate in it or not. Their characters may seek a further glimpse of the revealed reality or attempt to render the experience permanent and to live wholly in the 'other' dimension. While earlier chapters dealt with the visionary moment as a spontaneous occurrence, the present one focuses on mysticism as a positive strategy for survival, either as a way of life in its own right or as a perceptual method, an effort of the mind aiming to reproduce the experience which first occurred spontaneously. In some cases this focusing on mysticism as a way of life has concrete effects on the narratives of the prose works and on the nature of some of the dramatic characters in the plays.

I The Mystic Way in the Novels

(1) The problem

In Pirandello's work a character is taken out of his or her habitual reality, given a disturbing taste of another mode of being (not necessarily mystical or other-worldly) and is then observed struggling to find a new *modus vivendi*, a way of re-establishing equilibrium and of accommodating the transformed consciousness. Classic examples of this recurrent pattern are "La Carriola" and "Quand'ero matto...". Pirandello's work investigates a multitude of reactions to the Absurd crisis or to mystical revelation. Suicide and complete withdrawal from civic life are two extreme reactions.

Less radical strategies involve using the imagination to play with temporal and spatial perspectives or to rehearse murders and apocalypses. The mystical life and various traditional mystical procedures are also considered. "Quand'ero matto..." is a key work for understanding the nature of the anti-rational stance as a mode of living because it makes a distinction between the spontaneous mystical experience and the continuing state of madness. Many of the key passages of this novella were examined in a related context in Chapter three to which the reader is referred. During his visionary moment Fausto is outside himself and merges with the external, natural world. When he returns to 'consciousness' he is no longer aware only of himself but of all the realities he has glimpsed. This is his 'madness', and comprises a recognition of the equality of all realities in which the individual self is no longer given primacy. Fausto can still perform logical operations but, as he points out, sanity is not identical with logical behaviour as many things in life are "proprio irragionevoli". It is therefore a kind of madness to believe that life can be lived "secondo comunemente in astratto si ragiona" (NA II 162). It is truly mad to have no awareness of the gap between mental processes (words, reason and concepts) and reality. "Il male era che non comprendevo che altro è ragionare, altro è vivere" (NA II 162). While the lucid madmen like Romeo Daddi and Enrico IV have preserved an acute sense of the ordinary demands of life, Fausto, following his mystical experience, has entirely transcended the egocentric and anthropocentric consciousness and is wholly imbued with 'cosmic' awareness. He shows the impossibility of living fully in a society, in which the "Io" is "la base della vera saggezza", and simultaneously of living according to the mystical insight that all realities are equal: "sarebbe un Dio difficile", he says (NA II 163). To live 'whole' and in contact with creation means living outside normal social frameworks. The rest of the story illustrates precisely

this:

... mentre io per le mie terre camminavo in punta di piedi e curvo per vedere di non calpestare qualche fiorellino o qualche insetto, dei quali vivevo in me la tenue vita d'un giorno, gli altri mi rubavano la campagna, mi rubavano le case, mi spogliavano addirittura (NA II 164).

Fausto, now unable to put himself first, goes bankrupt and is reduced to poverty until his second wife teaches him to be "savio" once more.¹

"Quand'ero matto..." makes clear that the mystical experience is by definition momentary and unwilling. Any attempt to render it permanent leads to destitution and death, yet it is impossible to return to 'normal' consciousness after it. Fausto's experience is unique in Pirandello's work in that unity with the Divinity, the Absolute, with "Essere", is achieved and consequently the effects are the most radical: a failure to re-enter the former reality. More usually in Pirandello's work the moment of revelation leaves the character still able but unwilling to pursue his former lifestyle and motivated to forge a new one.

I(ii) Il fu Mattia Pascal

The theme of forging a 'new' reality is a constant one in Pirandello's work but in the three novels, Il fu Mattia Pascal, Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore and Uno, nessuno e centomila the level at which this creative process takes place is exceptional in some way, if not so outlandish as to be possible only within the privileged domain of fiction.

Although Pirandello can point to the existence of a case like Mattia Pascal's in real life, it must be said that the double coincidence of dying a 'civic death' and of having the financial freedom to build life and identity anew belongs more properly to the artificial realm of fictional demonstration.

Mattia Pascal, of course, has not experienced a revelation of truth. In the first instance he is running away from a suffocating, inauthentic life. His freedom is imposed on him: "Ero morto, ero morto: non avevo piú debiti, non avevo piú moglie, non avevo piú suocera: nessuno! libero!" (TR 327) The freedom brings the visionary moment, with the familiar vocabulary of transparency, inebriation and virginity:

Recisa di netto ogni memoria in me della vita precedente, fermato l'animo alla deliberazione di ricominciare da quel punto una nuova vita, io ero invaso e sollevato come da una fresca letizia infantile; mi sentivo come rifatta vergine e trasparente la coscienza, e lo spirito vigile e pronto a trar profitto di tutto per la costruzione del mio nuovo io. Intanto l'anima mi tumultuava nella gioia di quella nuova libertà. Non avevo mai veduto così uomini e cose; l'aria tra essi e me s'era d'un tratto quasi snebbiata; e mi si presentavan facili e lievi le nuove relazioni che dovevano stabilirsi tra noi, poiché ben poco ormai io avrei avuto bisogno di chieder loro per il mio intimo compiacimento. Oh levità deliziosa dell'anima; serena ineffabile ebbrezza! (TR 336-7).

The story of Mattia Pascal is ultimately that of a failed visionary. The narrative is imbued with and predicated on mystical perceptions such as those contained in the Premessa Seconda and in Anselmo Paleari's exposition of "lanterninosofia". But whilst he recognises that "potevo e dovevo esser l'artefice del mio nuovo destino" (TR 333), Mattia Pascal fails to break

out of the mental habits and psychological needs of his past. The first euphoria and madness fade away, as does the hilarity of observing life "da fuori" and Mattia finds himself craving stability, friendship, family, a home, love and "legality". With no 'other' reality on which to centre his life and freedom, he finds himself in a limbo experiencing the Absurd: "Ma la vita, a considerarla così, da spettatore estraneo, mi pareva ora senza costruito e senza scopo; mi sentivo sperduto tra quel rimescolio di gente" (TR 353).² Something within him hampers reconstruction on the basis of a total 'tabula rasa'.

Ora, se questo Adriano Meis non aveva il coraggio di dir bugie, di cacciarsi in mezzo alla vita, ... prevedevo che i fatti miei, eh, avrebbero cominciato a camminar male; ...

Ma la verità forse era questa: che nella mia libertà sconfinata, mi riusciva difficile cominciare a vivere in qualche modo (TR 352).

Freedom becomes isolation, and, driven by the menace of non-being, he gives in to the need for other people, re-building his life now, not on new principles but on those of his former imprisoned state. Finally, his lack of civic status forces him to a return within the law, represented by his former identity and setting. Looking back he sees the sense of freedom experienced at first as illusory: "Folle! Come mi ero illuso che potesse vivere un tronco reciso dalle sue radici?" (TR 449). He was unable to perpetuate that initial state of "follia" and so shows the truth of his perception in the Premessa that "l'uomo si distrae facilmente". He fails to find plenitude in nothingness, but he also fails to return to his former life. He ends up in a symbolic limbo, "fuori della vita", reliving his life in a purely verbal form in a "chiesa sconsacrata" (suggesting loss of identity or function) among a "vera babilonia di libri". His writing is a concrete manifestation of impotence, of failure either to transcend his life or to be reintegrated.³

I (iii) Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore

Serafino Gubbio is another who vents his impotence by writing, like Mattia Pascal, in a limbo. His Quaderni constitute his gesture of rebellion and vengeance against the alienated modern world of machines. His emblematic muteness is a part of his protest, and he writes his notebooks to evince the presence of the human soul in a world which would prefer to be soulless. They speak, indeed, for everyone whose humanity suffers onslaught from mechanisation. "Soddisfo, scrivendo, a un bisogno di sfogo, prepotente. Scarico la mia professionale impassibilità e mi vendico, anche; e con me vendico tanti, condannati come me a non esser altro che una mano che gira una manovella" (TR 1112).

From the beginning Gubbio presents himself as an outsider and as someone in touch with a beyond in a world which seeks ontological certainty in external forms and is afraid when these are shown to be empty. "C'è un oltre in tutto. Voi non volete o non sapete vederlo" (TR 1109). Gubbio sees both the beyond and the 'constructed' human world and makes no attempt to resolve this double perspective. His vision of the human world anticipates that found in Ionesco's early plays: noisy, gratuitous frenzy performed by puppet-like beings who have lost their souls to temporal forms and institutions:

Conosco anch'io il congegno esterno, vorrei dir meccanico della vita che fragorosamente e vertiginosamente ci affacenda senza requie. Oggi, così e così; questo e quest'altro da fare; correre qua, con l'orologio alla mano, per essere in tempo là. - No, caro, grazie: non posso! - Ah sì, davvero? Beato te! Debbo scappare... - Alle undici, la colazione. - Il giornale, la borsa, l'ufficio, la scuola... - Bel tempo, peccato! Ma gli affari... - Chi passa? Ah, un carro funebre... Un saluto, di corsa, a chi se n'è andato. - La bottega, la fabbrica, il tribunale... (TR 1109)

No one seems to be able to stand apart from those activities and ask whether they are "ciò che gli possa dare quella certezza vera, nella quale solamente potrebbe trovar riposo" (TR 1109). The frenetic development of technology is summed up as "quattro generazioni di lumi, ... olio,

petrolio, gas e luce elettrica, nel giro di sessant'anni ... troppe, sa? e ci si guasta la vista, ..." Such progress is seen to be at the expense of a light "che ci ajuti a veder dentro" (TR 1181). Gubbio's own stance is one of immobility, observation, silence and vision.

Roberto Alonge, in his political interpretation of Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore sees the source of Gubbio's alienation to be the failure of industrial society to give the "ceti medi" a role.⁴ He shows Gubbio's impassiveness, to arise out of "il senso di impotenza di quel ceto medio che la debolezza strutturale del capitalismo italiano non riesce a integrare nel sistema."⁵ It seems to me that Alonge's analysis is incomplete. He neglects to refer to the important passage in Chapter three of Quaderno One where Gubbio recognises that he and Simone Pau share "la stessa malattia", an awareness of the constructed and provisional nature of human reality which prevents them from finding a sense of certainty in it. All the vicissitudes of history and progress are attributed to the fact that human beings possess a superfluous quality which distinguishes them from animals and which "di continuo inutilmente li tormenta, non facendoli mai paghi di nessuna condizione e sempre lasciandoli incerti del loro destino" (TR 1115). It is this quality which Gubbio sees as spurring the human race not only to existential questioning – "non riesce a quietarsi mai in nulla né di nulla ad appagarsi quaggiù, tanto che cerca e chiede altrove, oltre la vita terrena, il perché e il compenso del suo tormento" – but also to ceaseless experimentation and change: "Tanto peggio poi l'uomo vi sta, quanto più vuole impiegare su la terra stessa in smaniose costruzioni e complicazioni il suo superfluo" (TR 1116).

Gubbio's understanding of how men fabricate and hypostatise their illusions and his awareness of an "oltre" prevent him from being drawn into the reality of 'others'. The problem of alienation is seen to be as much a problem of the sensibility of the individual as it is of modern society:

Mi sono allontanato con orrore istintivo dalla realtà, quale gli altri la vedono e la toccano, senza tuttavia poterne affermare una mia, dentro e attorno a me, poiché i miei sentimenti distratti e fuorviati non riescono a dare né valore né senso a questa mia vita incerta e senz'amore. Guardo ormai tutto, e anche me stesso, come da lontano; ... (TR 1132).

The problem examined by the book is that of how to 'opt out' in such a situation. The theme is discussed explicitly in Chapter three of the Quinto Quaderno in terms which look forward to Ionesco's analysis of the modern tendency, as he sees it, to equate the person with his work-role or function in society:

Noi possiamo benissimo non ritrovarci in quello che facciamo; ma quello che facciamo, caro mio, è, resta fatto: fatto che ti circoscrive, ti dà comunque una forma e t'imprigiona in essa. Vuoi ribellarti? Non puoi. Prima di tutto, non siamo liberi di fare quello che vorremmo: il tempo, il costume degli altri la fortuna, le condizioni dell'esistenza, tant'altre ragioni fuori e dentro di noi, ci costringono spesso a fare quello che non vorremmo; e poi lo spirito non è senza carne; ... (TR 1182)₆

Simone Pau's solution is to live a "minimalist" existence in a hostel for vagrants. "Non far più niente, o il meno possibile, come me, per restar liberi il più possibile? Eh sí." (TR 1182). Although Pau lives in simple material conditions, he spends his time teaching, writing bizarre philosophical articles and talking in cafés. As Gubbio points out, Pau is ironically more involved in the activities of the "superfluo" than he realises (TR 1116). He has only removed himself from the ultimate effects of those activities not from its use. He denies the body in order to indulge the mind.

The nameless violinist, obliged to accompany a mechanical piano for a living, gives up playing altogether and drinks himself to death, but not before he plays for the last time to the tiger in the cinema studio, surrounded by all the actors in their make-up and costumes. The scene creates a powerful image of the artist addressing himself not to society but to nature, the origin of life. While the studios will kill the animal to make a film (a fiction), the artist makes an attempt to communicate with

it.

Gubbio's position is more complicated and ambiguous and indeed the various stances he tries out form part of the plot of the book. He observes reality from without and it constantly appears dream-like to him. The stance is strongly reminiscent of Ionesco's as he describes it in

Notes et contre-notes:

Guardo per via le donne, come vestono, come camminano, i cappelli che portano in capo; gli uomini, le arie che hanno o che si danno; ne ascolto i discorsi, i propositi; e in certi momenti mi sembra così impossibile credere alla realtà di quanto vedo e sento, che non potendo d'altra parte credere che tutti facciano per ischerzo, mi domando se veramente tutto questo fragoroso e vertiginoso meccanismo della vita, che di giorno in giorno sempre più si complica e s'accelera, non abbia ridotto l'umanità in tale stato di follia, che presto proromperà frenetica a sconvolgere e a distruggere tutto. Sarebbe forse, in fin de' conti, tanto di guadagnato. Non per altro, badiamo: per fare una volta tanto punto e daccapo. (TR 1110)⁷

This desire to destroy the 'constructed' world, to return to basics and start again is shared by a number of Pirandello's characters, among them Diego Cinci and Lando Laurentano.⁸ Ionesco harbours similar fantasies: "Je nourris l'impossible espérance d'une catastrophe universelle qui nous détruirait tous" (PPPP 178).⁹

The Quaderni follow Gubbio's gradual withdrawal from language and relationships into "il mio silenzio di cosa", a silence whose nature changes slightly with events. At first it does not imply an indifference to human affairs, but like Fausto in "Quand'ero matto..." Gubbio embraces and sympathises with the realities of others around him; he suffers with them:

Vorrei non parlar mai; accogliere tutto e tutti in questo mio silenzio, ogni pianto, ogni sorriso; non per fare, io, eco al sorriso; non potrei; non per consolare, io, il pianto; non saprei; ma perché tutti dentro di me trovassero, non solo dei loro dolori, ma anche e più delle loro gioie, una tenera pietà che li affratellasse almeno per un momento (TR 1179).

Gubbio attempts to reduce the activities of his "superfluo" to a minimum and to see reality not through a web of personal constructions, but

"purely". This offers a curious variation of mystical structures used by Pirandello in other works. Gubbio contemplates and loses himself not in Nothingness or in Nature or an Absolute reality of some sort, but in the multiple realities of people near him. The language here echoes "Quand'ero matto...":

Ho ragione di credere ... che la realtà ch'io do agli altri corrisponda perfettamente a quella che questi altri danno a se medesimi, perché m'industrio di sentirli in me come essi in sé si sentono, di volerli per me com'essi per sé si vogliono: una realtà, dunque, al tutto "disinteressata" (TR 1193).

When Gubbio finds himself still prone to involvement, in love with Luisa Cavalea, and sees in Nuti's unbridled sadomasochistic passion for La Nestoroff a grotesque exaggeration of his own feelings, he is prompted to renew his withdrawal into silence. Seeing the "volgare meschinità dei casi in cui mi vedevo mescolato" he is overcome with nausea:

Mi sentii d'un tratto da questa nausea alienato da tutti, da tutto, anche da me stesso, liberato e come votato, d'ogni interessamento per tutto e per tutti, ricomposto nel mio ufficio di manovratore impassibile d'una macchina di presa, ridominato soltanto dal mio primo sentimento, che cioè tutto questo fragoroso e vertiginoso meccanismo della vita, non può produrre ormai altro che stupidità. Stupidità affannose e grottesche! (TR 1245).

The "oltre" of which Gubbio is aware is not a well-defined other-worldly reality but is made up partly of the irrational within man and partly of the reality which is created through a change of perspective. Gubbio's ability or tendency to see human affairs against a cosmic background is evident in certain passages of nocturnal contemplation and expounded as a theme when Gubbio, oppressed by Nuti's sleepless passion, opens a window and contemplates the stars:

Ed ecco che io ora posso aprire la finestra e mettermi a contemplare il cielo, mentr'egli di là si strazia le mani e piange, divorato dalla rabbia e dal cordoglio.... A quanti uomini, presi nel gorgo d'una passione, oppure oppressi, schiacciati dalla tristezza, dalla miseria, farebbe bene pensare che c'è, sopra il soffitto, il cielo, e che nel cielo ci sono le stelle. Anche se l'esserci delle stelle non ispirasse loro un conforto religioso. Contemplandole, s'inabissa la nostra inferma piccolezza, sparisce nella vacuità degli spazi, e non può non sembrarci misera e vana

ogni ragione di tormento. Ma bisognerebbe avere in sé, nel momento della passione, la possibilità di pensare alle stelle. Può averla uno come me, che da un pezzo guarda tutto e anche se stesso come da lontano (TR 1211).

When, having rejected love as a source of "certezza vera", Gubbio revisits his home in Naples (nostalgically evoked in Quaderno Two, Chapter one), like Ionesco in Printemps 1939, he experiences in the face of change, a strong sense of isolation, arising from the ephemerality and the illusory nature of reality and the self. This confrontation with the debris of the past leads to a sustained self-examination, significantly in the train. "In treno, mi parve di correre verso la follia, nella notte. In che mondo ero?" (TR 1255). Observing a fellow traveller who is "fermo e ben posato nel sentimento della sua tranquilla e ben curata bestialità", and who knows exactly where he is going in life "senza inquietarsi di nulla", Gubbio comes to a realisation that although they share the same train going to the same destination, their worlds do not overlap. The traveller is fully embedded in his world; Gubbio sees himself as outside time, outside himself, "senza tempo e senza mondo".

No, né mondo, né tempo, né nulla: io era fuori di tutto, assente da me stesso e dalla vita; e non sapevo più dove fossi né perché ci fossi. Immagini avevo dentro di me, non mie, di cose, di persone; immagini, aspetti, figure, ricordi di persone, di cose che non erano mai state nella realtà, fuori di me, nel mondo che quel signore si vedeva attorno e toccava. Avevo creduto di vederle anch'io, di toccarle anch'io, ma che! non era vero niente! Non le avevo trovate più, perché non c'erano state mai: ombre, sogno... [...] C'ero anch'io, forse, allora? c'era un io che ora non c'era più? (TR 1255-6).

This perception of the individual's utter solitude was later to be rigorously explored by Vitangelo Moscarda. Gubbio, at this point, sounds like a traditional mystic, beyond world and self, contemplating the nothingness of reality as lived and experienced by men, but in a later passage he makes clear distinction between his own position and that of the fashionable mysticism of the day:

- Evadere, signor Fabrizio, evadere; sfuggire al dramma! È una

bella cosa, e anche di moda, le ripeto. E-va-po-rar-si in dilatazioni, diciamo così, liriche, sopra le necessità brutali della vita, a contrattempo e fuori di luogo e senza logica; sú, un gradino più sú di ogni realtà che accenni a precisarsi piccola e cruda davanti agli occhi. Imitare, insomma, gli uccellini in gabbia, signor Fabrizio, che fanno sí, qua e là, saltellando, le loro porcheriole, ma poi ci svolazzano sopra: ecco, prosa e poesia; è di moda. Appena le cose si mettono male, appena due, poniamo, vengono alle mani o ai coltelli, via, sú, guardare in sú, che tempo fa, le rondini che volano, o magari i pipistrelli, se qualche nuvola passa; in che fase è la luna e se le stelle pajono d'oro o d'argento. Si passa per originali e si fa la figura di comprendere più vastamente la vita (TR 1270).

If there is a dividing line between this stance and that of looking at the stars in order to gain a different perspective (which Gubbio advocated earlier) it is a very thin one. Perhaps the difference lies in that between evasion (a refusal to face reality) and the ironic stance, where reality is regarded as a temporary fabrication hardly worth escaping from. Gubbio will not totally abandon the historical reality of a mechanised world but his participation is minimal. He serves his "macchinetta", he says, in order to be able to eat (TR 1113). Ultimately submitting to a culture which he hates, he aspires to a state of indifference: "non voglio più saperne di nulla; mi sono seccato di tutto, e vorrei mandare a gambe in aria ogni cosa" (TR 1271), and later "Io mi salvo, io solo, nel mio silenzio, col mio silenzio, che m'ha reso così - come il tempo vuole - perfetto... Ora basta. Voglio restare così. Il tempo è questo; la vita è questa; e nel senso che do alla mia professione, voglio seguire così - solo, muto e impassibile - a far l'operatore" (TR 1281).

Although he works outwardly with the fixity and silence of an object, he nevertheless refuses to fix himself on any of the forms of the world he serves. He follows the relentless flux of 'Essere' not in its pure state but in all the contingent forms in which it expresses itself. So he must turn the handle of his camera in time with the action before him:

In nulla, più in nulla, in mezzo a questo tramenio vertiginoso, che investe e travolge, bisognerebbe fissarsi. Cogliere, attimo per attimo, questo rapido passaggio d'aspetti e di casi, e via,

fino al punto che il ronzio per ciascuno di noi cesserà (TR 1113). Paradoxically Gubbio gives himself totally to his role as "operatore": alienation by means of a machine becomes the solution to the problem of alienation. In many ways Gubbio is a relative of Leone Gala and Baldovino who find refuge in 'forms' and inhumanity. They all avoid one kind of tyranny by embracing another. Despite his awareness of the stars, Gubbio can be seen to be fleeing from the vision of a more sinister type of "oltre" suggested in certain passages of nocturnal reflection:

Le grandi architetture umane, nella notte, e le costellazioni del cielo pare che s'intendano tra loro. Nella frescura umida di quell'immenso sfondo notturno, sentii quel mio sgomento sobbalzare, guizzare come per tanti brividi, che forse mi venivano dai riflessi serpentini dei lumi degli altri ponti e delle dighe, nell'acqua nera, misteriosa, del fiume.... Incerto della via, incerto di tutto, nel vuoto orrore delle vie deserte, piene di strane ombre vacillanti nei radi riverberi rossastri dei fanali, a ogni soffio d'aria, sui muri delle vecchie case, pensavo con terrore e con nausea alla gente che dormiva sicura in quelle case e non sapeva com'esse apparissero di fuori a chi errava sperduto per la notte, senza che per lui ce ne fosse una, ove potesse entrare (TR 1116).

The "riflessi serpentini" suggest the sinister and look forward to Enrico IV, while the light and water images recall the visionary quality of "Il Viaggio". The passage expresses succinctly the doubleness of Gubbio's vision. Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore seems then to assert that ultimately history cannot be avoided and that true peace is only found beyond death. The stars offer only a temporary and often ambiguous comfort.¹⁰ The novel may be seen to anticipate Hinkfuss' statement in Questa sera si recita a soggetto: "La liberazione e la quiete non si hanno se non a costo di finire di vivere" (MN I 210).

The novel displays some attitudes which Ionesco would like to adopt but which he cannot sustain:

On devrait avoir une indifférence totale pour l'histoire, les hommes, leurs histoires. Ce n'est pas possible. Mon tempérament colérique est à la fois anxieux et plus fort que tout. Trop de colères, trop de pitié, trop de peur. Dire que j'aurais pu être l'esprit le plus ironique de l'univers. Dommage d'avoir raté tout ça (PPPP 95).

In the light of this it is tempting to see Gubbio's passage as being from a position of 'umorismo' to one of irony. The connection between visionary moments and such aesthetic qualities as humour and irony will be examined in the following chapter.

Ionesco's work presents some further parallels with Gubbio's stance. "On ne peut être heureux que si on se désintéresse de tout" (HQ 117). Silence is also one of Ionesco's occasional aspirations but his silence would not involve a submission to the historical world, being rather a silence of the written word which he sees as his main mode of communication with the world. In Un Homme en question Ionesco declares, "je suis tout le temps sur le point de démissionner." which he defines as "me taire" (HQ 8). Later in the same interview he returns to this desire to retreat from language: "J'ai l'impression qu'on ne devrait pas parler, parce que plus on parle, ... moins c'est clair. Et que toute explication vous enferme dans une définition. Rompre le silence, c'est déjà entrer dans ce monde" (HQ 24).

Gubbio's use of the written word is a way of keeping alive what the society around him destroys. At one point he wishes that he could do for real life what he does for fiction when filming, namely record the 'outside' view of human antics and so provide a second perspective to them:

Ah se fosse destinata a questo solamente la mia professione! Al solo intento di presentare agli uomini il buffo spettacolo dei loro atti impensati, la vista immediata delle loro passioni, della loro vita così com'è. Di questa vita senza requie, che non conclude (TR 1185).

A close relative of Serafino Gubbio and, in his misogyny, also of the narrator of "La Trappola", is Dottor Mangoni of "Niente" who lives in a similar minimalist way, working within society and avoiding secure domestic arrangements without actually resorting to the "ospizio di mendicizia". "Dormo dove posso. Mangio quando posso. Vesto come posso" (NA I 871).

Paradoxically he calls himself "un grand'uomo", a reversal entirely consonant with mystical discourse in which poverty or a lack of 'limits' (whether mental or material) are seen to yield 'transcendental' riches and freedom. Like Gubbio he has opted out of whole-hearted participation in life, having recognised the nothingness of everything: "- Che capitò a tempo, caro signore, che non metteva conto di nulla. E che anzi, quanto più ci s'affanna a divenir grandi, e più si diventa piccoli" (NA I 871). Yet Mangoni differs from Gubbio and is ultimately a less pessimistic portrait because his lifestyle is based on an awareness of the possibilities within life rather than despair at the lack of an alternative this side of death. His explanation of how the life of the poet whom he is called out to save would have been reduced if he had survived indicates that Mangoni's stance is really a mode of protest at how the fullness of life is reduced and tarnished. This underlying positive attitude is suggested only in the details of Mangoni's affection for his hat and his boyish pleasure at his ride in a carriage: "- Come trotta bene questo cavallino, - gli dice allora il dottor Mangoni, sdraiato voluttuosamente nella vettura" (NA I 870).

In their flight from the torment of duality, Pirandello's characters may plunge into formlessness or withdraw into form. While the narrator of "La Trappola" likes to imagine himself dissolving into the darkness as the evening light fades, Sirio Dossi of Diana e la Tuda aims to turn the ebullience of life into a statue before committing suicide. In "Il tabernacolo", Spatolino suffers "il crollo della sua fede nella giustizia divina" which paradoxically provokes him to abandon his family and become the statue of Jesus in the shrine he has just built. This provides an unusual and humoristic twist to the mystical notion of union with the divine. By a further irony he becomes respected as a holy man and subsists on the offerings of the faithful. The fantastical element in the story is

exposed by the introduction of humoristic details. The return of Spatolino's "grillo canterino", his whistle "- Fifií..fifií'...fifií'...." suggests the presence of his old character in his new role and this is reinforced by the incongruous detail of "Jesus" climbing down off his pedestal "a fare i suoi bisogni dietro al muro" (NA I 143). The solutions of Serafino Gubbio and Spatolino may be seen as the working out of one of Pirandello's fantasies. Writing to his sister Lina in March 1889, Pirandello stated "Io vorrei starmi finché vivo, in silenzio, come una pietra".¹¹ The presence of the humoristic perspective in "Il Taber[^]acolo" would seem to show that Pirandello, like Ionesco, used writing simultaneously to express and mock his own impulses.

I (iv) Uno, nessuno e centomila

In Uno, nessuno e centomila Pirandello pursues the "dimissionario" fantasy to its limit, plotting the process from the moment of Absurd crisis to a state of transcendence of all rational, logocentric, self-reflective consciousness. At the start of the novel Vitangelo Moscarda is already living outside many of the usual constraints of life, being rich enough not to have to work. His leisure encourages his compulsive tendency to cogitate:

anch'io, ... di quei tempi ero fatto per sprofondare, a ogni parola che mi fosse detta, o mosca che vedessi volare, in abissi di riflessioni e considerazioni che mi scavavano dentro e bucheravano giù per torto e su per traverso lo spirito, come una tana di talpa; senza che di fuori ne paresse nulla (TR 1286),

a tendency which motivates the plot and produces the "considerazioni sulla vita", which are the main substance of the novel.

His intellectual propensity has already made his experience of reality unconventional and fluid. On the road of life

Mi fermavo a ogni passo; mi mettevo prima alla lontana, poi sempre più da vicino a girare attorno a ogni sassolino che incontravo, e mi maravigliavo assai che gli altri potessero passarmi avanti senza fare alcun caso di quel sassolino che per me aveva assunto le proporzioni d'una montagna insormontabile, anzi d'un mondo in cui avrei potuto senz'altro domiciliarmi (TR 1286).

Fluidity of perspective has made of Moscarda a Pyrrhonist: he sees so many alternatives and realities that he can never act with any resolution or certainty. "Ero rimasto così, fermo ai primi passi di tante vie, con lo spirito pieno di mondi, o di sassolini, che fa lo stesso" (TR 1287). This sense of the equality of all realities, as we have seen with "Quand'ero matto...", is essentially a mystical awareness, implying as it does the non-absolute nature of conventional human reality. Most people, says Moscarda, hitch themselves up to a carriage of one sort or another and drag it along all their lives. They centre themselves on one reality only. "Non tiravo nessun carro, io; e non avevo perciò né briglie né paraocchi;

vedevo certamente piú di loro; ma andare, non sapevo dove andare" (TR 1287).

The revelation which jolts Moscarda out of his paralysis and sets him scrutinising the relationship between himself and the external world is quintessentially absurdist and humoristic. His Copernican crisis originates in the sudden realisation that his nose is not what he has always thought it was.¹² Although he is standing before a mirror, it is his wife who casually 'throws back' at him a disturbing 'other' reality which creates the disruptive double perspective. The first disjunction of many in the novel opens up: that between inner and outer reality: "Mi si fissò invece il pensiero ch'io non ero per gli altri quel che finora, dentro di me, m'ero figurato d'essere" (TR 1288).

From here Moscarda paradoxically reasons himself beyond reason into a state of madness, not back into the secure constructed world. In this sense, the novel constitutes an inverted 'Bildungsroman' in which the protagonist, instead of being integrated into society after recognising his identity and role, decides to reject the world and all notions of identity. Much of the novel consists of notes or reflections on identity and reality, often very abstract and closely argued. In the absence of a central plot of action, what keeps the narrative pushing forward is the sense of urgency in Moscarda's surging towards truth and his desire to communicate it. The ideas are communicated with a burning sense of their importance. Giovanni Croci speaks of "la febbre raziocinante, l'inesorabile furia dialettica..."¹³ Moscarda himself says at one point:

... strappato dalla concitazione dell'ira a quella terribile fissità di luce che folgorava tetra da quanto avevo cosí solitariamente scoperto: tenebra per tutti gli altri che vivevano sicuri nella pienezza abituale dei loro sentimenti (TR 1380).

The style has a directness created by the device, often used by Pirandello, of having a first person narrator address the reader or some unseen inter-

locutor, and reinforced by constant questioning and hypothesising.¹⁴ His mind can embrace "mondi" or "sassolini", and his prose mingles logic with concrete, powerful imagery and a strain of lyrical nature imagery which strengthens as he nears his liberation, and which bursts into full flower, so to speak, at the climax. Through the use of imagery, metaphysical questioning becomes a vivid, physical experience:

Perché, quand'uno pensa d'uccidersi, s'immagina morto, non piú per sé, ma per gli altri? Tumido e livido, come il cadavere d'un annegato, rivenne a galla il mio tormento con questa domanda, ... (TR 1369).

A toccarmi, a strizzarmi le mani, sí, dicevo "io"; ma a chi lo dicevo? e per chi? Ero solo. In tutto il mondo, solo. Per me stesso, solo. E nell'attimo del brivido, che ora mi faceva fremere alle radici i capelli, sentivo l'eternità e il gelo di questa infinita solitudine (TR 1384).

Furthermore abstract cogitation rubs shoulders with concrete, often comic examples taken from domestic and provincial life. Matching this heterogeneity in the languages is the doubleness of Moscarda's discoveries: the light, the darkness, the horror, the freshness, the anguish. In its disjointed, jerky "spoken" quality, the text itself embodies loss of centre. At one point Moscarda defines his mind in terms strongly reminiscent of Pirandello's definition of the humorist:

... questo mio animo disposto a pensare e a sentire anche il contrario di ciò che poc'anzi pensava e sentiva, cioè a scomporre e a disgregare in me con assidue e spesso opposte riflessioni ogni formazione mentale e sentimentale; ... (TR 1318).

Like the humorist, Moscarda has a strong eye for the incongruous detail, for the clash of the cosmic and the earthly.

In his systematic dismantling of his identity and of constructed reality, he finds himself viewing things from two perspectives. The minutiae of life, the "sassolini", may assume prominence, making the familiar suddenly seem strange: "A tutti i figli sarà forse avvenuto. Notare com'alcunché d'osceno che ci mortifica, laddove è il padre per noi che si rispetta" (TR 1327). Having discovered the constructed nature of

reality and identity, and that the only immutable, certain thing about himself is his name, Moscarda begins to live outside himself, seeing himself in the third person. He is projected virtually beyond time and space:

Era così bello, peccato! in quello studio di notaro tra tutti quegli incartamenti ingialliti in quei vecchi scaffali polverosi, parlare così, come a una distanza di secoli, d'una certa casa di pertinenza d'un certo tal Moscarda Vitangelo... (TR 1348)

Once the relativity and subjectivity of reality have fully penetrated his awareness, Moscarda cannot refrain from reflecting upon how other people and objects view human affairs: we are treated to a tree's eye view, a dog's eye view, a bird's eye view (literally) and a chair's eye view. Pushing this further with the realisation that "la coscienza, vuol dire gli altri in noi; ... (TR 1370), Moscarda glimpses a reality of infinite possibilities:

Mi corse per la schiena il brivido d'un ricordo lontano: di quand'ero ragazzo, che andando sopra pensiero per la campagna m'ero visto a un tratto smarrito, fuori di ogni traccia, in una remota solitudine tetra di sole e attonita; lo sgomento che ne avevo avuto e che allora non avevo saputo chiarirmi. Era questo: l'orrore di qualche cosa che da un momento all'altro potesse scoprirsi a me solo, fuori della vista degli altri (TR 1369).

Moscarda's discoveries represent a terrifying liberation, not a glimpse of chaos but a limpid vision of the nature of things in their purity beyond constructions: "quest'orrore: la coscienza della pazzia, fresca e chiara, signori, fresca e chiara come una mattinata d'aprile, e lucida e precisa come uno specchio" (TR 1345).

The supreme catalyst and emblem of Moscarda's new perception is the countryside. In Chapters eight, nine and ten he takes the reader "Fuori all'aperto", out of the city, away from personal objects laden with memories and associations, "animati come sono da tutti i vostri ricordi". The peace felt in the countryside comes, says Moscarda, "dal semplicissimo fatto che siamo usciti or ora dalla città; cioè, sí, da un mondo

costruito; ..." (TR 1312-3). Departure from the normal parameters of perception is conveyed through the use of impressionistic devices, through splashes of colour and through emphasis on broad outlines. "Che gioja in questa vana frescura, azzurra e verde, d'aria chiara di sole!" (TR 1312). The clouds "veleggiano luminose per la sterminata azzurra vacuità" (TR 1313). Moscarda's ultimate solution is glimpsed in this idealised countryside where everything is free from the torments of duality which the possession of a "coscienza" brings:

Ah, non aver piu coscienza d'essere, come una pietra, come una pianta! Non ricordarsi più neanche del proprio nome! Sdrajati qua sull'erba, con le mani intrecciate alla nuca, guardare nel cielo azzurro le bianche nuvole abbarbaglianti che veleggiano gonfie di sole; udire il vento che fa lassù, tra i castagni del bosco, come un fragor di mare. Nuvole e vento (TR 1313).

Until he is shot by Anna Rosa, Moscarda is caught between the constructed world (which he has gone as far as possible in annihilating within himself) and the authentic one beyond it. With his brush with death he is finally propelled beyond duality. His 'symbolic' death and resurrection into the fluid world beyond constructions precipitates the dissolution of the self. "Mi sentivo come inebriato vaneggiare in un vuoto tranquillo, soave, di sogno" (TR 1411). His relationship with objects has now changed. Looking at his green blanket:

Ci vedevo la campagna: come se fosse tutta una sterminata distesa di grano; e, carezzandomela, me ne beavo, sentendomi davvero, in mezzo a tutto quel grano, con un senso di così smemorata lontananza, che quasi ne avevo angoscia, una dolcissima angoscia.

Ah, perdersi là, distendersi e abbandonarsi, così tra l'erba, al silenzio dei cieli; empirsi l'anima di tutta quella vana azzurrità, facendovi naufragare ogni pensiero, ogni memoria! (TR 1412).

The judge faced by Moscarda at this point is, like judges throughout Pirandello's mythology, the ultimate classifier and believer in material appearances, facts and deterministic logic; a functionary of a man-made system which regards people as constant personalities in control of their

acts.¹⁵ Alienated from life, immured within constructions, he is the antithesis of Moscarda in the visionary state, open to all life, swimming in the "gran fiumana". "È bene che lei anzi si turi gli orecchi per non udire il terribile fragore d'una certa rapina sotto gli argini, oltre i limiti che lei, da buon giudice, s'è tracciati e imposti per comporre la sua scrupolosissima coscienza" (TR 1412). His relationship with existence is comically described by Moscarda in symbolic terms: "Per via, andava di traverso, come i cani; benché poi tutti dicessero che, moralmente, nessuno sapeva rigare più diritto di lui" (TR 1412). Rather than destroying the judge's world by giving him "le mie considerazioni sulla vita", Moscarda gives him an example of their outcome: a gratuitous remark about an apparently trivial object. "Ma davvero, scusi, non le sembra bella, così verde, questa coperta di lana?" (TR 1413).

When Moscarda joins the ranks of the beggars in the "ospizio di mendicizia" he has founded, he has renounced possessions, status, identity and individuality. He compares his own type of selflessness with that of a priest, working for an institution which gives unity to his acts and confers on him as agent an identity and status in the community. Whereas the priest "voleva ancora essere uno per sé, da distinguere bene dagli altri per la sua sapienza e la sua potenza,..." (TR 1415), Moscarda lives amongst beggars "senz'alcuna distinzione" (TR 1414).

When in the final section Moscarda has renounced personality, a civic role, mirrors, words, names, reason and thought, he lives totally in the present and focuses only on what is before him; he has no further need of memory:

Nessun nome. Nessun ricordo oggi del nome di ieri; del nome d'oggi, domani. Se il nome è la cosa; se un nome è in noi il concetto d'ogni cosa posta fuori di noi; e senza un nome non si ha il concetto, e la cosa resta in noi come cieca, non distinta; ebbene, questo che portai tra gli uomini ciascuno lo incida, epigrafe funeraria, sulla fronte di quella immagine con cui gli apparvi, e la lasci in pace e non ne parli più. Non è altro che

questo, epigrafe funeraria, un nome. Convieni ai morti. A chi ha concluso. Io sono vivo e non concludo. La vita non conclude. E non sa di nomi, la vita (TR 1415-6).

Without concepts and without self, Moscarda unites^e with all he sees. The abyss between inner and outer realities is obliterated as inner becomes outer: "Quest'albero, respiro tremulo di foglie nuove. Sono quest'albero. Albero, nuvola; domani libro o vento; il libro che leggo, il vento che bevo. Tutto fuori, vagabondo" (TR 1416).¹⁶ Whereas Serafino Gubbio lets the social world flow through him in silence and is at one with it, Moscarda unites with the non-human world, seeing it, as Ionesco claims to do, as though for the first time:

Io esco ogni mattina, all'alba, perché ora voglio serbare lo spirito così, fresco d'alba, con tutte le cose come appena si scoprono, che sanno ancora del crudo della notte, prima che il sole ne secchi il respiro umido e le abbagli (TR 1416).

In order to be at one with life he must stop his mind from working and returning to abstracts. "Impedire che il pensiero si metta in me di nuovo a lavorare, e dentro mi rifaccia il vuoto delle vane costruzioni". He no longer sees the world in the context of human webs of meaning but for itself, in its purity. He hears the bells "non più dentro di me, ma fuori, per sé sonare, che forse ne fremono di gioja nella loro cavità ronzante,..." Only by surrendering himself in this manner to the external world of change and objects can Moscarda attain wholeness: "muojo ogni attimo, io, e rinasco nuovo e senza ricordi: vivo e intero, non più in me, ma in ogni cosa fuori" (TR 1416).

For a brief passage the style of writing reflects this relationship with the world: the text merely lists and states what Moscarda's eye settles on. We find a stream of sentences all beginning with 'And'. However, in another way the writing exposes the fictional nature of Moscarda's evasion from the problems of duality. He claims to have sustained oneness with Being, to have broken into the "oltre" and remained

there. Having abandoned the individual self and all the baggage of consciousness, he describes the stages by which he arrived there in resonant Italian prose.

Here the discourse itself both poses the problem and resolves it. If he has abandoned language, who is reading a book and writing the story? The double perspective from which Moscarda claims to have escaped is in fact perpetuated by the text, the very existence of which belies the content. This disjunction between form and content exposes Moscarda's solution as a fantasy. What we have here is not bona fide madness but in fact "la coscienza della pazzia".

Vitangelo Moscarda is not the only character in Pirandello's work to see a solution in the suppression of the activities of the mind. Fabio Feroni of "Paura d'esser felice", finding his inner hopes, dreams and aspirations constantly thwarted by events of the outer world, hits on the solution of halting the constructing processes of the mind in order to annihilate the gap between mind and reality, to be at one with what 'is': "Non sperare piú, non piú illudersi, non desiderare piú nulla; andare innanzi cosí, in una totale remissione, abbandonato alla discrezione della sorte ..." (NA II 93). But while such a strategy might be practicable for the hypothetical Moscarda, Feroni is finally destroyed by his mental manoeuvres and is overtaken by insanity.¹⁷ The possibility of narrowing the scope of consciousness finds an echo in Ionesco, which in turn is reminiscent of Pirandello's "lanternino":

Être comme un homme qui circulerait, avec une lanterne, dans les ténèbres, n'éclairant qu'un tout petit espace autour de lui à mesure qu'il avancerait. Le cercle lumineux se déplace et tout le reste est ou retourne à nouveau dans la nuit la plus profonde. Seule luit la conscience d'un présent, d'un instant éveillé (PPPP 39).

Vitangelo Moscarda's extremes of perspective, the cosmic view and the minute close-up are used by several characters in the short stories as a

method of dealing with crisis. In no way is their mystical strategy a recommendation as to how to live. It is purely a way of seeing. Mysticism may be associated with ascetic withdrawal, but is not to be equated with it. As the Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx says, "Genuine mysticism is never a flight from the world..."¹⁸ It is essentially a revolution of consciousness. The Bhagavad Gita defines it as a mode of perception, "When one sees Eternity in things that pass away and Infinity in finite things, then one has pure knowledge", a universal notion familiar through Blake's lines from Auguries of Innocence:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.¹⁹

Both 'astral' and 'microscopic' perspectives are found in Pirandello and Ionesco's work, the first as a movement away from the earth to a cosmic, distanced view of human affairs which makes them seem small and unimportant, and the second as a zooming in to take account of every detail of life. Both perspectives reject man-centred hierarchies of being, the primacy of human reality over others. This brand of mysticism involves not the striving to meet the transcendent divine, but rather an attempt to embrace all that is, in order to compensate for the blinkered nature of perception conditioned as it is by the need for everyday survival.²⁰

The microscopic visionary contemplates objects or aspects of objects in isolation and tries to jolt them out of the habitual webs of meaning and contexts which culture and history have woven around them. He seeks the essence of things behind the man-made and imposed frameworks. Tommasino Unzio of "Canta l'Epistola" immerses himself in the day to day reality of a blade of grass. Blades of grass seem to be used as mystical symbols by both Pirandello and Ionesco. "Toutefois, ce n'est pas le succès social qui m'attache à la vie. Regarder avec attention, me concentrer sur un brin

d'herbe me suffit" (ANT 195). The shift in values in this declaration by Ionesco is typical: the focusing on a blade of grass is not seen as an escape from life but as a way of drawing closer to it. Ionesco sees "dépaysement" as being one of his goals in order to reach "l'état primordial", the perception of things one has as a child, or as Adam would have had. He explains that such perception may be induced by travel but it can also happen in one's own room:

Il me suffit de fixer attentivement mes regards sur cette lampe que je vois tous les jours ou sur cette chaise ou sur cette page de cahier, et si je regarde cette chaise, cette lampe, assez longtemps et bien attentivement, le voyage peut commencer sans voyage et le monde se renouvelle.... C'est au moment où j'ai l'impression que je me détache du monde que j'y suis le plus attaché. C'est au moment où j'ai l'impression d'être en marge du monde que je me retrouve au coeur du monde (DEC 107).

In the case of the 'astral' mystical method, the estrangement from habitual reality is achieved by viewing it as though through the wrong end of a telescope.²¹ The distancing may be temporal or spatial. The "filosofia del lontano" occurs in a number of Pirandello's works, most fully expounded of course by Dr. Fileno of "La tragedia di un personaggio", for whom it is "il più efficace rimedio a ogni sorta di mali, una ricetta infallibile per consolar se stesso e tutti gli uomini d'ogni pubblica o privata calamità" (NA I 715). His "cannocchiale rivoltato" removes the urgency of present problems by transforming them into past history. An identical stance is Enrico IV's "piacere della storia", the pursuit of which enables him to live a finite, predictable series of events. Such a distancing technique is the ideal solution for Ionesco too because it permits of an existence outside life without the necessity of crossing the frontier of Death. He can contemplate life without subjecting himself to the traumas and uncertainties of interaction:

Maintenant encore, pour me sortir de mes angoisses, je me mets comme en marge du monde et je le regarde, attentivement, comme si je voyais tout pour la première fois, comme au premier jour de la conscience. À l'écart du monde, en retrait, je le contemple comme

si je n'en faisais pas partie. Il m'arrive alors parfois de me sentir transporté par la joie (ANT 317).

And again: "Il faut voir les choses de très haut. Il ne faut pas se laisser prendre au piège des idéologies, ces clichés éphémères,..." (PPPP 62).²²

Jacopo Maraventano, the astronomer of "Pallottoline!" (1898) is professionally constantly aware of cosmic events. In the light of the "germogliare dei mondi dall'etere infinito",

che cosa diventava per lui questa molecola solare, chiamata Terra, addirittura invisibile fuori del sistema planetario, cioè di questo punto microscopico dello spazio cosmico? Che cosa diventavano questi polviscoli infinitesimali chiamati uomini; ...? (NA II 420).

Human achievements seem puny to him; man's pride in his inventions, arrogance. Although Maraventano sees God as the product of human fear and superstition, he is, nevertheless, scornful of human reason: "L'uomo, questo verme che c'è e non c'è, l'uomo che, quando crede di ragionare, è per me il più stupido fra tutte le trecentomila specie animali che popolano il globo terracqueo, ..." (NA II 422). Insect images seem to be germane to Absurd writing: the expression "insetti umani" occurs twice here.²³

Maraventano's astral perspective even enables him to diminish the pain of toothache. It is typical of Pirandello's writing though that in "Pallottoline!" the attitude of Maraventano is offset by a sympathetic portrait of two people for whom earthly reality is important. Maraventano's "disprezzo in cui teneva la terra e tutte le cose della vita" is contrasted with the suffering of his wife and daughter in the terrible cold and loneliness of Monte Cavo. This is a perspective missing from Uno, nessuno e centomila where the first person narrative does not allow for the reality and suffering of Dida, Moscarda's wife.

Similar to the 'astral' perspective is the device of viewing life sub specie aeternitatis. For Ionesco, to see the insignificance of life is a

source of relief:

... la pensée que tout cela, tout ce que j'aime, tout ce dont j'ai peur, tout ce que je hais, tout ce que je veux repousser, tout ce que je veux garder, quand je pense que tout cela ne sera plus, je suis consolé, je peux m'endormir. Tout cela n'est rien, tout cela va mourir, tout cela va s'effacer, savoir que tout cela va mourir me soulage, me permet de vivre (PPPP 55).

An alternative method is to view everything as unreal: "Pour pouvoir supporter l'insupportable, je m'accroche désespérément à l'idée que tout ce qui m'entoure n'est pas vrai, le monde n'est pas vrai" (HQ 117). The method is akin to the "via negativa" of St. John of the Cross and of Dionysius the Areopagite: a wholesale rejection of earthly life as unreal, as darkness, something to be swept aside in order to make way for the truth. The difference between Ionesco and his mystical predecessors lies in their degree of eschatological or transcendental certainty. Pirandello's "l'uomo dal fiore in bocca" operates a similar policy of de-realising the world, though ultimately, as will be shown in the next chapter, the motivation is different:

Io le dico che ho bisogno d'attaccarmi con l'immaginazione alla vita altrui, ma così, senza piacere, senza punto interessarmene, anzi... anzi... per sentirne il fastidio, per giudicarla sciocca e vana, la vita, cosicché veramente non debba importare a nessuno di finirla (MN I 508).

I (v) Le Solitaire

Le Solitaire and Uno, nessuno e centomila present a multitude of parallels of thought and some startling similarities of detail. Although both depict the mental processes and domestic problems of a protagonist who opts out of conventional life, the mechanics of these structures are different and ultimately make for a very different reading experience. Although the text of Uno, nessuno e centomila reflects Moscarda's psychological dilemma in its diversity of styles, the structure of the narrative is classically linear. Moscarda's fever of reasoning gives it a necessity and furious pace from the initial remark about his nose to the final 'ec-stasis'. He is looking back on his spiritual journey and showing the reader – often in schematic note form – the distinct stages of his discoveries. His text is a demonstration. The final disintegration of reality and identity is caused directly by the initial 'nose' crisis.

The protagonist of the Le Solitaire drops out of society and civic life, leaves work and begins searching and questioning thanks to an "héritage inattendu", a device presented here as a conscious cliché: "C'est bien rare, mais il y a encore des oncles d'Amérique, à moins que le mien ne fût le dernier" (LS 9).²⁴ It is almost as though the author wants an excuse to relieve him of the burden of plot-making so that he too can give his whole attention to his ideas. It is a feature of both Uno, nessuno e centomila and Le Solitaire that they contain a kind of "summa" of their authors' ideas, held together by the first person narrator and by the sense of a quest for truth.²⁵ The account of 'le solitaire' lacks the visionary certainty of Moscarda's, and the reader has the impression that he has written it, not in order to communicate something he feels to be true, but in order to help himself find his way and work things out. While Moscarda's story is divided into books and chapters, 'le solitaire's' is an amorphous mass of prose riddled with contradictions and repetitions and

largely made up of questions, hypotheses and suppositions. It is decentered in a different way from Uno, nessuno e centomila. Its only unity lies in the protagonist's despair and his desire to know.

Whereas in Pirandello's novel the events of the plot arise logically out of Moscarda's discoveries, those in Le Solitaire have no such necessity. The hermit is essentially an observer, waiting passively for some kind of revelation which, when it comes, has no obvious link with any previous event. Everything he does is conditioned either by habit or by outside events: he stops going to his regular restaurant because of the 'revolution' which then causes him to move from the front room of his flat to the back one, where, for lack of anything else to do, he contemplates the sky and waits. This pattern is basically that of Introvertive mysticism: an ascetic paring-down and minimising of earthly, physical life in order to focus on the 'essential', but the novel lacks any sense of a burning mission. Once Moscarda has worked out the consequences of his crisis, he knows exactly where he is going even if he cannot get there directly. He is dazzled by his discoveries and finds in them a certainty which supports him throughout his 'journey' because it tells him that his madness is the road to truth and authenticity.

The hermit, by contrast, sometimes sees himself as ill. There are references to mental illness and to chronic ennui; he is virtually an alcoholic.²⁶ There are elements of self-pity and self-indulgence: one moment he is claiming universality for his perceptions and experiences, the next he sees himself as special and different from others.²⁷ Some of his traits verge on the contemptible: "Je ne quitterai pas encore l'hôtel; il fallait attendre que je trouve une servante pour tenir la maison. Il m'était impossible d'utiliser un balai, encore moins un aspirateur" (LS 37). Having given up work out of boredom, he proceeds to immure himself within a new set of habits and routines. "Entre l'effort et l'ennui, c'est

toujours un certain ennui que je choisissais, que je préférais" (LS 70).²⁸ He even admits that his ennui exists because he has opted out of work, and he constantly makes empty resolutions to do something positive. At one point he explains that he seems mad "parce que je vois et sais" (LS 141) yet for most of the novel he bleats that he does not and cannot know anything. This element of neurasthenic boredom is absent from Pirandello's visionaries whose anguish results rather from knowing that another life exists and from being unable to reach it. They may be weighed down by illness, problems and duties but they are never bored, lacking in imagination or abulic. The hermit suffers basically from a kind of metaphysical absolutism: "C'est parce que je veux tout savoir que je ne sais rien" (LS 57) and "Moi je ne peux vivre qu'en état de grâce" (LS 111).²⁹

Despite this contrast in the main characters, these novels are both predicated on one essential perception, that human reality is a construction and that meaning is projected rather than immanent or 'given': "nous savons que la forme des choses n'est que l'image que nous faisons d'elles..." (LS 56). As Pirandello does, the hermit sees this process of construction as arising out of a fear of Death and the unknown. "Ça bricolait parce qu'ils ne pouvaient pas expliquer l'inexplicable" (LS 170). He conceives the human world as built on a foundation of ignorance and nothingness – a notion which gives rise to the 'chinese box' image and a number of theatrical metaphors. "Trop matérielle et immatérielle à la fois. Ce monde en carton de pâte, ce décor de théâtre pouvait se substituer n'importe quand à un autre" (LS 123).³⁰ The hermit will not participate in a world whose ultimate foundations he does not know, and which requires him to accept a reality which he has not constructed for himself. Like Moscarda, he does not feel in control of something which is an intimate part of him. "Nous sommes conditionnés, sociologiquement, mais cela n'est rien, biologiquement, plus que ça, cosmiquement. Et tous ces

mots que je viens de dire, ceux-là aussi sont dits avant que je ne les dise, plantés en moi" (LS 77). Ignorance of our origins invalidates all thought for the hermit so his quest is for a 'given' basis for construction, a kind of 'zero degree' of reality.

Toute notre raison chavire dans le chaos. Que pouvons-nous savoir de la justice, de l'ordre physique, de l'histoire, des lois de la nature, du monde, si les bases fondamentales de notre entendement possible nous sont inconnues à nous-mêmes? (LS 27).

... un savoir limité n'est pas un savoir (LS 76).

While Moscarda sees the 'origin' in the vitalistic flux of being, the hermit sees it as motionlessness, the antithesis of the human world around him: "je retrouverai la réalité de ce qui ne bouge pas derrière ce qui bouge" (LS 144). He pictures himself "au mur du monde", on the outer limit of reality, rather as Moscarda sees himself "fermo ai primi passi di tante vie", with his fellows well entrenched in the constructed world:

Je ne me résous pas à démarrer du mur. C'est peut-être une maladie. Je suis demeuré tout seul au pied de ce mur. Tout seul, comme un sot. Eux ils ont fait du chemin, ils organisent même des sociétés, plus ou moins bien, c'est vrai, et il y a des engins extravagants. Moi je ne fais que regarder le mur et je tourne le dos au monde" (LS 57).

From this perspective the furious activity of his fellows seems incomprehensible, futile and ridiculous. "Mais les aimer, ces créatures qui bougent, qui parlent, qui s'agitent, qui font du bruit, qui exigent, qui désirent, qui crèvent? C'est plutôt comique" (LS 171).³¹ Sometimes he experiences violent impulses either towards others or himself:

Nous savons tous que rien n'est plus triste qu'un dimanche après-midi. Les jeunes couples avec la maman enceinte qui poussait la voiturette d'un bébé, tandis que le jeune papa avançait en en tenant un autre par la main, me donnaient l'envie de les tuer ou de me suicider (LS 19).³²

Pirandello's Nicola Petix of "La Distruzione dell'uomo" is similarly disgusted by the meaningless proliferation of squealing babies and rowing families in the sordid tenement where he lives. His observation and contemplation of life from without has led to "un tedio infinito, un tedio

insupportabile tanto della vita quanto degli uomini" (NA I 899). The focus of his loathing is the single, monumentally pregnant woman whom he ultimately pushes into the river.

In Uno, nessuno e centomila true being is given concrete presence in the form of landscape and nature. There is no nature mysticism or pantheism in Le Solitaire whose protagonist has no fixed notions of the beyond, occasionally even doubting whether it exists at all. Sometimes it is simply what lies outside the "Symbolic order" of man-made constructions. It is also seen as that which lies 'beyond' the human experience of routines which dull perception:

Oh oui, il suffit de soulever le léger rideau qui recouvre le monde de la quotidienneté et du banal qui sont en nous plutôt qu'à l'extérieur, rien n'est banal si on regarde attentivement, à la fois drame et comédie (LS 82).

Sometimes he feels that paradise is within the human being rather than in the outside world. "Il nous faut une certaine perspective,... le monde ensoleillé nous l'avons en nous-mêmes, la joie pourrait éclater à tout instant continuellement, si on savait à temps" (LS 38). The secret of happiness lies in changing human perception, not in the world itself. "Ce sont les bornes de l'imagination que je voudrais enlever. Les murs de l'imagination que je voudrais faire sauter" (LS 75). The few experiences of joy he has had seem to him to provide sufficient evidence of a beyond:

... s'il y a ces sursauts, s'il y a ces jaillissements c'est qu'il y a une source inépuisable, il y a une fontaine, il y a peut-être aussi un lac tout neuf entouré par des montagnes blanches aux pentes dorées par le soleil et la lumière d'un paradis intérieur (LS 110).

Elsewhere this joy is attributed simply to an awareness of existence. "La joie, c'est de s'apercevoir tout d'un coup, d'une façon qu'on pourrait appeler surnaturelle, que le monde est là et que l'on est dans le monde, que l'on existe, que j'existe" (LS 121).

This uncertainty as to the exact nature or locus of happiness is

reflected in a passage where he makes fun of this vision by switching suddenly from the metaphysical to the literal:

Il devait y avoir plein de fontaines de vie dans les jardins, dans les rues, que je ne voyais pas. Il devait y en avoir, certainement. Quand je sortis, j'écartai les bras pour mettre la main sur une, par hasard. Le temps était sec, pas une goutte d'eau (LS 140).

Ionesco uses a similar technique following a particularly abstract and metaphysical passage. The resulting humour helps to lighten what could be ponderous and melodramatic:

Je me trouvais à la frontière du monde. Devant moi, le trou sans fond de l'incrée. Toute la création était derrière moi. L'univers était dans mon dos, me poussant vers l'abîme, de tout son poids. Quel vertige!... Un pas en avant, une chute, je serais happé, englouti, dissous par le rien. ... Le cosmos basculait. Ce monde était-il trop pesant ou bien évanescent? D'un instant à l'autre il peut disparaître. Ou bien m'écraser par sa lourdeur. Entre le plein et le vide, je m'écroulai.

On m'aida à me relever (LS 143).

A similar, almost humoristic, distance is created by Ionesco's occasional propensity for word play.³³ A double perspective is created in the structure of the novel when the hermit telephones his philosopher friend for advice and the solid first person perspective is disrupted for the first time, though the 'outside' opinion is of course reported to the reader by the hermit himself.³⁴ Despite this sporadic self-mockery, it is his glimpses of a world beyond habit and form which buoy him up through his depressions: "Je sais que le monde est toujours, inlassablement vierge. C'est cela qui me donne comme une raison de vivre" (LS 110).

The hermit has a number of strategies for bringing himself closer to the 'beyond'. One of these involves the suspension of the constructing process at source, the halting of the workings of the mind and of thought, such as we see at the end of Uno, nessuno e centomila. The hermit calls it "le bouclier de la non-pensée" (LS 28). Reason and thought cannot penetrate the mystery of life, so it is best not to use it. "Surtout, ne

pensons pas. Ne pensons à rien. Ne jugeons de rien" (LS 27). A further withdrawal from interaction with the world is similar to Fabio Feroni's: "Je désire surtout ne pas avoir de désirs" (LS 40). He recognises the role that other people play in the construction of reality and resents the sense of powerlessness that this brings: "Quelle force ont les clichés que vous refusez mais qui finissent par vous pénétrer de façon insidieuse et vous imprègnent!" (LS 60). Everyone fights to give credibility to their own constructions and are therefore distracted from the 'origin':

Il faut tout de même compter avec les gens. Ils existent puisqu'ils m'ennuient quand ils se mêlent de mes affaires. Cela suffit pour que je décroche et que je retombe parmi eux. Ils vous tirent hors de la réalité, ils vous enferment dans la leur. Dans leur façon de voir, plutôt. On adopte leur optique. On s'aperçoit qu'on doit compter avec les autres. Je ne peux pas ne pas tenir compte d'eux, c'est évident, mais je veux compter surtout sur l'ailleurs. C'est l'ailleurs qui est vrai (LS 99).

As well as attempting to have no part in the constructed world he mentally tries to undo it, a mode of de-realising akin to the 'via negativa' of the Introvertive mystics and similar to the procedures used by Pirandello's beggar in "La mano del malato povero":

Regarder attentivement le monde, tout autour; très attentivement. Le débarrasser de sa 'réalité', lutter pour retrouver à chaque moment l'étonnement originel. Retrouver la sensation de l'étrange. Se réveiller et voir et sentir ce que tout cela est en vérité. Oui, l'existence, le monde, les gens, tout cela est fantomatique. Il n'y a de fondamental que ce qui est hors de tout cela, par-delà le mur. Être jeté dans le monde, c'est la détresse. Retourner sans cesse au commencement, ne pas se laisser aller, ne pas s'y laisser prendre. Adossé au mur, voir le monde à partir de là ou bien se retourner face au mur, se coller au mur. Peut-être cédera-t-il? (LS 91-2).

The hermit often focuses on individual, banal objects and attempts to free them of the associations and meanings imposed by the mind and other people. As in Uno, nessuno e centomila, the beyond is conceived as lying beyond language:

Je fis encore un effort pour retourner dans l'ailleurs, là où cela n'a plus de nom. Je regardai le plus fixement, le plus attentivement possible, une tache de vin rouge sur la nappe. J'avais déjà fait cette expérience avec succès. Et il s'agissait de

regarder ce quelque chose jusqu'à ne plus savoir ce qu'il était.... Cela me fixait moi-même dans l'ailleurs (LS 68).

Language itself may be the source of a de-realisation process: "Souvent, il me suffisait de répéter assez longtemps et assez vite le mot cheval ou le mot table jusqu'au moment où la notion se vidait de son contenu, toute signification disparaissant" (LS 69). But whereas Moscarda loses himself in the beyond along with language and concepts, the hermit uses such methods to reinforce his sense of self and to regain control over it. "C'est quand je me sens seul, cosmiquement seul, comme si j'étais mon propre dieu, le maître des apparitions, c'est à ce moment que je me sens hors de danger" (LS 67). By deliberately alienating himself from the world, he confirms his own existence:

À mesure que les autres passaient et s'éclipaient, je me sentais unique dans ce tourbillon qui ne pouvait être réel. Le réel devenait une sorte d'espace vide que je remplissais. Une dilatation euphorique du moi, et plus il me semblait que "tout cela" n'existait qu'à peine, plus cela me confirmait dans ma certitude d'être (LS 66).

Vitangelo Moscarda turns away from the constructed world entirely, to focus on all that moves and changes. Sometimes it is clear that Ionesco's hermit is not so much seeking a contact with a beyond as desiring to relinquish dialogue and participation for an aesthetic stance of observation and contemplation which distances the world. This is more akin to the attitude of Serafino Gubbio:

Je fis un effort de concentration, essayant d'oublier tous les chemins que j'avais vus et toutes les villes et toutes les rues et tous les gens et toutes les choses.... Je voulais retrouver cette étrangeté du monde qu'il m'arrive parfois d'obtenir. C'est comme si on se trouvait à un spectacle, c'est-à-dire comme si j'étais à l'écart, distancé, ne prenant plus part, n'étant plus cet acteur ou ce figurant que je suis, que nous sommes d'habitude. Entouré par le monde mais pas au monde.... J'arrivais à obtenir une sorte de neutralité morale. Ou une neutralité esthétique (LS 65).

He really wants it all ways: to be in the world yet not involved. "Être à la fois entouré de tout cela et dehors. Un spectateur sur le plateau au milieu des acteurs" (LS 82). His euphoria then is often caused by a mere

release of responsibility and the turning of the world into an object for contemplation. This is identical to Pirandello's "filosofia del lontano":

La vie est merveilleuse quand on la regarde dans son ensemble, dans son passé, dans cette sorte d'espace que devient le temps quand tout s'est éloigné. Cela fait tout un bloc, une sorte de maison ou une sorte de château que l'on peut visiter, pièce par pièce, étage par étage (LS 102).³⁵

In the same vein is the familiar death perspective in which life is seen as finished and therefore as something to be contemplated. "Regarder le monde avec le point de vue d'un mort, si cela était possible. C'est une féerie.

... Et cela fait comme un tout avec des contours précis que le regard du souvenir peut embrasser, scruter, analyser, reconstituer" (LS 103).³⁶ Like Pirandello's "L'uomo dal fiore in bocca", the hermit recognises that life is truly tasted in the past, in memory:

Que de regrets doit avoir l'homme qui s'en va quand il s'aperçoit que tout fut miracle, les moindres des choses, l'odeur du café le matin, une querelle drôle, c'est amusant les querelles, une mouche dans la soupe, l'uniforme d'un dragon, le dragon dans son uniforme (LS 103).

Despite all these mystical strategies, the only occasion on which joy is experienced, it arises simply through a ray of sunlight bursting into a gloomy setting.³⁷

As in Pirandello's work, the alienated or aesthetic perspective is ambiguous, sometimes bringing anguish, sometimes release (LS 65). The reporting of disasters worldwide in newspapers is used by the hermit either to support his case that life is terrible, or else as a source of comfort since, as a mere reader, he is unaffected by them.³⁸ From time to time the hermit's consciousness soars away from his personal problems to a vision of human smallness which deprives him of any motivation or involvement: "Et qu'étions-nous, Jacques Dupont et moi, deux hommes, deux malheureux insectes parmi trois milliards d'autres" (LS 26).

There is one unusual 'cosmic' episode which involves an anonymous stranger who comes into the hermit's restaurant after the first phase of

the 'revolution'. His arrival has the gratuitousness of the descent of an angel. He delivers a kind of set-piece after which there is no further mention of him. The piece consists of a description of life "au delà du centre dans la banlieue ouest", beginning with the locality and widening out to encompass "l'Océan" and "les îles". But at each widening of the perspective there is also some small detail included: "Après, il y a les îles. Des feuillages. Le printemps éternel. Les femmes nues." Its function seems to be to remind the hermit that his world is only a small part of a vast whole. "Nous sommes dans une prison, certes, mais la prison est grande et belle avec les parcs et des jardins" (LS 176). The vision which follows is akin to that of Belluca in "Il treno ha fischiato", a cosmic, geographical vision but which brings a sense of kinship and closeness:

Tout d'un coup, l'univers m'apparut dans sa vastitude et dans sa variété. Dans le monde, il y avait des chemins, il y avait des montagnes, il y avait des prés, il y avait des sources, un ciel souriant, des hommes fraternels. Il y a des pays où l'on aime les étrangers et où on les accueille. On leur donne à boire et à manger, ils habitent des maisons sans toit car il n'y pleut jamais. Les étoiles sont tellement basses qu'elles semblent à portée de la main. Des fruits (LS 176).

The hermit decides to try and reach this 'other' side and attempts to retrieve his money from the bank but it is too late, he is hemmed in by the barricades.

Like Moscarda, once the hermit has abandoned the fixed perspective required for living in society, his mind acquires a mobility and swings between "l'infiniment grand" and "l'infiniment petit": "Je ne pouvais plus supporter ce que j'appelais la nausée de la finitude et la nausée de l'infini" (LS 58). This eventually culminates in a passage recalling Pirandello's vision in "Sopra e sotto" and elsewhere of man as a worm in possession of a mind that can reach beyond the physical world before it:

En regardant le ciel, j'essayais toujours de voir l'au-delà du ciel. Est-ce que "je" existe? "Je" était là pourtant entre deux

infinis, le grand et le petit. Qu'étais-je? D'une part, un point. D'autre part, un conglomérat de galaxies. Des univers naissaient en moi, s'épanouissaient, se détérioraient, mouraient. J'étais des galaxies, j'étais des milliards de siècles pour des systèmes cosmiques. J'étais des milliards et des milliards de kilomètres pour des êtres que je ne connaissais pas, des milliards d'êtres qui agissaient en moi, qui s'indignaient, qui se révoltaient, qui se combattaient, qui s'aimaient, qui se détestaient. Oui, tout cela était en moi (LS 189).

The sense of unity or identification with the world beyond the individual self is reminiscent too of "Quand'ero matto...".

There is a spontaneous quality in the hermit's altered perspective on banal objects. Ionesco is clearly indebted here to Sartre. In the passage where the hermit 'confronts' the wardrobe, there are echoes of the tramseat and the tree root of La Nausée. The hermit suddenly sees the wardrobe as pure object divorced from its function: "Je regardais un objet se trouvant devant moi, un mètre soixante-dix de haut, un mètre vingt de large, avec deux battants de porte que l'on pouvait ouvrir" (LS 120). As in the classic Absurd experiences, words no longer account for the phenomenal world:

Pourtant les mots mentaient. Non seulement les objets n'étaient plus les mêmes, mais les mots n'étaient plus les mêmes mots. Les mots me paraissaient faux. Les objets avaient perdu, me semblait-il, leur fonction.... J'étais plongé dans un monde nouveau dont je ne savais que faire.... Étais-je dans un monde parallèle, dans le monde négatif du nôtre,..." (LS 120).

As for Roquentin, "les fonctions ne dévoilaient pas l'essence des choses. Et tout ce qui était autour de moi, c'étaient des autres. Et j'étais un autre" (LS 121). The hermit and Roquentin both experience a kind of identity crisis as the loss of habitual meanings disrupts their consciousness. For both, the world sways and teeters precariously:

À présent, tout semblait prouver l'inexistence des choses et ma propre inexistence. J'avais peur de disparaître.... Tout s'effritait, tout menaçait de sombrer dans un néant quelconque.... Y aurait-il quelque chose derrière ce décor? ... Je me sentais ébranlé dans un monde ébranlé. C'est curieux comme tout est à la fois si présent et si fragile. Cela existait-il vraiment? Cela avait-il jamais existé? Une défaillance un peu plus grande et tout pouvait se briser, en des milliers de morceaux. Je me sentais

être un des points lumineux d'une gerbe d'artifice. La nausée du vide. Et puis la nausée du trop-plein (LS 122).

The hermit is disturbed and oppressed by objects; his glimpses of paradise, logically, are characterised by emptiness and abstractness:

L'image de la mer sans limite, d'un désert calme, souleva en moi comme une sorte d'espoir. Aimer le désert, aimer le bleu de la mer, aimer la blancheur des navires, cela me semblait possible (LS 171).

Towards the end of the book he retreats even further from the world and lives passively in a state of suspension: "J'étais en attente. Une attente de je ne sais quoi. Mais une attente vivante et vibrante. Quand de légers nuages passaient, mêlés au ciel bleu, j'essayais d'interpréter quelque chose, j'essayais de lire dans le ciel" (LS 188). Looking back he sees that in effect he has retreated inside a world of his own making: "À l'intérieur de la grande prison universelle, je m'étais fait une prison plus petite sur mesure. Je m'étais fait un coin où je pouvais vivre" (LS 188). In reviewing his life he recognises the lost chances, the wasted potential. It is the reverse of Moscarda's spiritual journey and it emerges that what the hermit sought in opting out was to anchor reality in a 'ground' or centre, to give the constructing process an authentic foundation to enable him to return to civic life. The Absurd, the dismantling and questioning are here the necessary prelude to reintegration with a renewed consciousness: "J'aurais voulu recommencer. Pour que cela recommence, il faut d'abord que ceci finisse" (LS 159). This begins to happen when the neighbouring apartment blocks are rebuilt. He seems to have accepted the futile constructing of life and no longer blocks it off: "C'est pour construire que l'on démolit. C'est pour démolir que l'on construit" (LS 190). At the same time he is still waiting for his revelation. A sign of its imminence is a "lézarde dans le ciel" which he contemplates:

Un matin à l'approche de midi, comme je regardais le ciel bleu

par-dessus les toits ainsi que je le faisais souvent, je vis apparaître une fente, une légère fissure qui s'étendit silencieusement d'un bout à l'autre de la voute azurée. La fente était lumineuse, une lumière plus forte que la lumière du jour, comment dirais-je, un bleu plus bleu que le bleu du ciel. J'espérais quelque chose. Évidemment, il faut avoir le temps de regarder le ciel et de le regarder attentivement. Mais les gens ne lèvent pas les yeux (LS 190).

When successive periods of disillusionment, recollection and regret culminate in a final revelation, the experience is expressed in semi-pastoral, semi-Biblical symbolism: a flowering tree full of coloured birds. Birds are an ancient symbol of transcendence and I shall return to the symbol of the tree shortly. The close link between despair and renewal suggested in the novel is now symbolised by the fact that the tree has grown out of a pile of rubbish: "Du tas d'ordures de la cour, transformé en gazon, l'arbre avait poussé" (LS 205). But the unreal tree disappears and is followed by a vision in which the material world dissolves and sways "comme des images dans l'eau qui court". The desert imagery returns inducing a sense of suspension familiar from accounts of visionary moments elsewhere in Ionesco's work:

Les murs et les toits semblaient se disloquer, leurs contours devinrent flous.... Ils se perdirent dans le lointain lumineux, fumées transparentes, disparurent. Devant mes yeux, le désert s'étendit, immense sous le ciel lumineux, dans le soleil ardent, jusqu'à l'horizon. Il n'y avait plus que du sable scintillant dans la lumière. Ma chambre semblait être suspendue, silencieuse, un point dans l'immensité (LS 206).

Finally the very object through which the hermit experienced the Absurd, the wardrobe, becomes the source of a further vision, as the doors open to reveal the same tree and light as before, and the scene expands to become a garden with a large tree at its centre and "une échelle d'argent, suspendue à un mètre du sol," which "se perdait dans le ciel bleu." (LS 207-8) There is also reference to a temple - an image which was used earlier in the novel along with some explicitly religious images.³⁹ Having seen himself and positioned himself 'outside' reality and the world throughout the

novel, the hermit now returns to the 'centre':

Les échelons brillaient. Le jardin s'approchait de moi, m'entourait, j'en faisais partie, j'étais au milieu. Des années passèrent ou des secondes. L'échelle s'approcha de moi. Elle se maintint presque au-dessus de ma tête. Des années passèrent ou des secondes (LS 208).

Although the vision disappears, the novel ends on a sense of renewal and hope. "Quelque chose de cette lumière qui m'avait pénétré resta. Je pris cela pour un signe" (LS 208).

Ionesco draws on religious symbolism from a number of cultures here. The tree is associated with the Centre in many religions and is seen to link different planes of the universe because it has roots in the ground and branches reaching up into the sky.⁴⁰ The ladder too serves to link dimensions of being, both in the Rig Veda and in Genesis.⁴¹ Mircea Eliade notes that "A good many of the myths speak of a tree, of a creeper, a cord, or a thread of spider-web which connects Earth with Heaven, and by means of which certain privileged beings do, in effect, mount up to heaven."⁴² Such symbols are not only trans-cultural (or archetypal) but they play a role in a wide range of rites – initiation, funeral, enthronement of important people, marriage.⁴³ The act of ascension symbolises, says Eliade, "the way towards the absolute reality".⁴⁴ The notion of initiation is particularly relevant in this thesis. Eliade says, "'Initiation' means, as we know, the symbolic death and resurrection of the neophyte or, in other contexts, the descent into Hell followed by ascension into Heaven."⁴⁵ In the light of this, the pattern analysed in this thesis of Absurd fragmentation being a prelude to mystical union and renewal, can be seen as a re-enactment of an age-old ritual.

Ionesco's novel ends tantalisingly at a 'beginning' which is not elucidated in everyday terms. The precise significance of the symbols is not described. This is of course quite in keeping with much mystical writing. If the absolute or the transcendent were apprehensible in earthly

terms there would be no problem and no novel. Furthermore the symbols used by Ionesco are those by means of which mankind has always attempted to talk about the ineffable. As Eliade says, "Images by their very structure are multivalent. If the mind makes use of images to grasp the ultimate reality of things, it is just because reality manifests itself in contradictory ways and therefore cannot be expressed in concepts."⁴⁶

It is very surprising that Ionesco decided to turn Le Solitaire into a play, Ce formidable bordel. A first-person novel whose protagonist is essentially an observer and philosopher does not promise any 'drama' in the popular sense of the word. The plot of the novel is very thin, if it is even worthy of the designation: the events are essentially unrelated in causal terms and are really a springboard for contemplation and analysis. Like Moscarda, the hermit is a chronic thinker and at each turn the cosmic and abstract break in on the banal and the concrete. Even more surprising is the fact that such a novel became a play in which the central character (le Personnage) is almost silent. At some points in the play Ionesco has put the thoughts of the hermit from the novel into the mouths of a group of surrounding characters - neighbours, girlfriends, the concierge.⁴⁷ Much of the play consists of long monologues by these characters rather than exchange and debate between them. The action of the play is loosely based on the relationships of the hermit with his girlfriend and the concierge and on the revolution going on in the background. There is no logical or causal link between the various scenes. The neurasthenic, "absurdist" episodes which make up the bulk of the novel and give rise to the most interesting writing are condensed into one purely visual moment where the 'Personnage' observes his girlfriend asleep and is overcome with panic at her "blessure béante", her genitals (TH VI 187). At the moment where, in the novel, the hermit is filled with euphoria at the sight of a ray of sunlight in the restaurant, in the play the noises and movements of the

other people around the 'Personnage' take on a sung or balletic character. The euphoria of the central character is expressed through a stylisation of the acting and in the lighting. All the novel's passages of cosmic perspectives and dreams of a paradise are condensed into one long fantastic monologue, spoken by Agnès (TH VI 179). Because of the central character's refusal or inability to communicate, there is more emphasis in the play on love than on metaphysical certainty. In the last scene, which has no equivalent in the novel, the 'Personnage' is visited by "des personnages morts" from his past or the dead relatives of old acquaintances, who all express their love for him: "On vous aimait beaucoup" (TH VI 196-7). Having rudely rejected this, the Personnage sees a vision similar to the final one in the novel, to which he responds by laughing, addressing God as a "Coquin": "Ah! Ça alors! Ça alors! J'aurais dû m'en apercevoir depuis longtemps. Quelle farce! C'est ahurissant! Quelle blague! Quelle énorme blague!" (TH VI 199) With the conclusion that life is God's joke, any meaning that might have emerged from the preceding action is cancelled out. The play only presents one side of the novel: the side which questions and which sees human activity as futile and frenetic. The conclusion of the play confirms the 'theatricality' of action and the emptiness of all the words thrown out by the characters. The play in a sense 'confirms itself'; "farce" can be seen to refer to what the audience has just seen as well as to life. This self-referentiality is absent from the novel where the questioning and the pessimism are a condition of the final transcendence.

Le Solitaire as its title suggests is a portrait of a sensibility, a way of experiencing and seeing the world. A first person novel is the ideal form for such a portrait. Drama however relies largely on interaction and conflict for its effect. In Ce formidable bordel Ionesco has not drawn on the potential conflicts in the novel as fully as he might have. Some of the characters in the novel who seem to be most antagonistic

towards the hermit or of a different sensibility are shown in the play to be just as disenchanted with the world as the 'Personnage.' If anything, the 'Personnage' stands out for his indifference and lack of emotion, not for his anguish. Without the monolithic first person perspective of the novel, the play offers a broader view of human experience in which the clashes of character are less schematic or clear-cut. This would seem to be a continuation of a change first seen in Le Piéton de l'air where for once the female protagonist is not a diametrical opposite of her anguished husband but is given an anguished inner world of her own.

II The Mystic Way in the Plays

(1) Trovarsi

In Pirandello's work there is usually a clear-cut distinction between the visionary character who sees beyond constructions and those whose perceptions are framed by them. An interesting exception is the play Trovarsi which juxtaposes two different ways of rejecting the conventional or "il solito". The play is unique in portraying a dramatic character who claims to live permanently in the 'beyond'.

The structure of the play is complex not only because the central character, Donata, undergoes a voyage of discovery which entails her changing her ideas, but above all because Pirandello is not working with a simple dualistic antithesis. Contrasts and parallels are set up between everyday life, pantheistic mysticism and the theatre. The play intricately combines two of Pirandello's central concerns: the theatre (with all its attendant metaphysical resonances) and the beyond. Both are used here with all the ambivalences with which they are endowed earlier in Pirandello's work.

The structure of the play is a familiar one in Pirandello's theatre: the central character suffers a loss of equilibrium (or a crisis of identity) and is seen attempting to regain it, in a struggle towards wholeness and renewal. Donata's attempt to 'find herself' involves initially an impulsive confrontation with danger on the sea, amounting to a desire for death (MN II 940). She survives because she cannot give herself wholly to spontaneity and fluidity. At the vital moment she clings onto Elj, with whom she then tries to have a relationship in the hope of creating for herself, for the first time, "una vita mia" (TH II 930).⁴⁸

Elj is Pirandello's least convincing mystical figure. He presents himself with the familiar qualifications: an outsider, rejecting relation-

ships, convention, reason, rules and plans and seeing purity and authenticity in nature.⁴⁹ He is a stranger to Donata's desire to have an identity of her own: "Non ho mai cercato di saperlo, come sono... Mai fatta un'idea di me stesso..." – and has a loathing of the 'usual' which is very Ionescan in expression: "– Non posso soffrire tutto quello che è solito" (MN II 928). He claims to have realised the aim of the beggar in "La mano del malato povero" to perpetuate the type of perception attained during visionary experiences:

non è facile, sai, dipingere come vorrei io... le cose come appaiono in certi momenti... lo scoppio, lo scompiglio di tutti gli aspetti consueti che hanno ridotto la vita, la natura, oh Dio, come una moneta logora, senza più valore. Io non capisco: è come volersi umiliare... subire... Il solito cielo che t'ammicca con le solite stelle, sulle solite case che ti sbadigliano con le solite finestre, e tu che vai sul solito lastricato delle solite strade... Ah, che soffocazione! Ti sarà avvenuto qualche volta – non sai come – non sai perché – di vedere all'improvviso la vita, le cose, con occhi nuovi.. palpita tutto, a fiati di luce – e tu, sollevata in quel momento e con l'anima tutta spalancata in un senso di straordinario stupore... – Io vivo così! In questo stupore! E non voglio sapere mai nulla! (MN II 928-9).

This is all familiar material but it is offset by a number of contradictions. Elj stands out amongst Pirandello's mystics for the absence of any suffering or tortured awareness in his character. He lacks any ontological conflict because he has not had to make any sacrifices to make mysticism a way of life; a large inheritance subsidises his freedom from routines and people and also his means of escape, his boat. Although he describes himself as an elemental, pantheistic mystic, he does not lose himself in the elements. He smacks more of an existentialist à la Hemingway in the way he reinforces his sense of self through extreme and dangerous situations.⁵⁰ Although he believes that human origins lie in water and that "il più proprio dei pesci è il silenzio" (MN II 937), he is capable of using language very skilfully. His mysticism comes over as a sort of aristocratic, verbal 'atteggiamento'.

The most significant discordant note, however, is struck by the

contradiction between his rejection of people and his desire to throw himself into a relationship with Donata and then into the conventional social form of marriage. He is not one of Pirandello's compassionate visionaries capable of understanding the realities of other people. He wants Donata solely on his terms and can only see her as a body. Their long exchange in Act Two is painful for the contrast between Donata's earnest desire to get to the bottom of her problems and Elj's inability to understand the extent of her disillusion. He constantly trivialises her dilemma.

Elj is really an embodiment of Donata's flirtation with non-being. He is an externalisation of something very inward which would be better evoked in narrative. In making her contact with this aspect of her own nature take the form of a relationship, the credibility of the mystical element is undermined. It is Elj's symbolic status as a term in an ontological choice which makes him stand out from the rest of the characters in the play who are realistic figures, imitating people of the real world. Underlying this need to externalise a mode of experience in this manner is the problem discussed in Chapter three of the untheatrical nature of the mystical experience. In Trovarsi however, this is not just a problem for mystical experience alone but also for all of Donata's private conflict whose subtlety cannot be rendered in terms of action but is verbalised and therefore makes of Trovarsi one of Pirandello's wordiest plays.⁵¹

Critics have seen Elj and Donata as polar opposites: Life versus Art, Spontaneity versus Reflection (the latter antithesis suggested in the motif of "occhi chiusi" and "occhi aperti" which is used throughout the play).⁵² They do indeed contrast on a number of points. Elj invites Donata to live without plans and forms, in an unselfconscious manner:

E non si può vivere così... come in vacanza? senza bisogno di crearsi nulla? A caso - com'è vero - come tu sei vera - come io sono vero - che ci viene all'improvviso di scapparcene e piantiamo

qui tutto... [...] La vita - come ti si presenta - come ti va ...
- senza bagagli... (MN II 933-4).

His sense of self must be spontaneous. Conscious creation, he maintains, kills life. "Ma bisogna trovarsi così nella vita, di volta in volta, senza cercare; perché, a furia di cercare, se alla fine riesci a trovarti, ma sai che t'avviene? che non trovi più nulla e non puoi più vivere: bell'e morta, con gli occhi aperti!" (MN II 936). Donata however needs control and has to work through 'media' of various sorts and to see herself at each stage. Even when she attempts to 'close her eyes' she still has to experience herself through Elj: "E io non voglio più vedere, non voglio più sentire che in te la mia vita. Ecco, toccarla in te,..." (MN II 930). In doing this she is almost on her own admission doing exactly what she did in the theatre: "Per trovar la vita - facendo così - sai che ho dovuto fare? cercarla, sentirla in altre creature che l'avevano - oggi in una, domani in un'altra - create dalla fantasia - a cui io ho dato la verità del mio corpo, della mia voce" (MN II 934). For Elj the theatre is a place of pretence and inauthenticity and he begs Donata to leave "Tutti i bagagli delle vesti altrui." (MN II 936). When he sees her on stage he is not so much perturbed by her poor performance as her replication for purposes of fiction of the very gestures and verbal expressions she has used with him in private. He fails to see that what is important is the involvement behind the use of certain forms, not the forms themselves. For Donata it is the giving of herself that matters and she understands that life expresses itself naturally through form and that creation is a normal part of life, even though forms cannot embrace all the aspects and possibilities within life:

Perché finzione? No. È tutta vita in noi. Vita che si rivela a noi stessi. Vita che ha trovato la sua espressione. Non si finge più, quando ci siamo appropriata questa espressione fino a farla diventare febbre dei nostri polsi... lagrima dei nostri occhi, o riso della nostra bocca..." (MN II 912).

Despite these differences there is a surprising pattern of similarities between the two, many of them suggested through the use of a shared language. Pirandello blatantly uses the language of mysticism to describe the experience of acting, so that ultimately Donata possesses as many mystical traits as Elj.

Even before Donata appears she is associated with a sensibility alert to things beyond the normal and with a feeling for childhood: "una ragazzina timida, gracile, sempre appartata... [...] mi fece sovvenire di tante cose ch'io avevo dimenticate e lei no - piccole cose d'infanzia... cose da nulla, ingenua..." (MN II 905). This element is reinforced when she evokes her intuition of all the potential life within a human being. The passage is partly a repetition of a passage from "La carriola":

Finché si resta così... sospesi... da potersi volgere con la mente... qua, là... a ogni richiamo in noi d'una sensazione, d'una impressione... a tante immagini che un desiderio momentaneo può accendere... o un ricordo rievocare... con quest'alitare in noi... sí, di ricordi indistinti... non d'atti, forse nemmeno di aspetti...ma, appunto, di desideri quasi prima svaniti che sorti.. cose a cui si pensa senza volerlo, quasi di nascosto da noi stessi... sogni... pena di non essere... come dei fiori che non han potuto sbocciare... - ecco, finché si resta così, certo non si ha nulla; ma si ha almeno questa pienezza di libertà... di vagare con lo spirito... di potersi immaginare in tanti modi... (MN II 914).

Above all Elj and Donata share a perception of everyday life as colourless and tedious and as imposing limitations on the possibilities of one's being. Donata sees the theatre as "l'unica possibilità di vivere tante vite ... [...] Paragoni queste tante vite che può avere un'attrice con quella che ciascuno vive giornalmente: un'insulsaggine, spesso, che ci opprime..." (MN II 912). The theatre offers a person the opportunity of using all the "germi di vita" inside himself. Donata sees it as a passage into 'otherness': "Evadere! Trasfigurarsi! diventare altri" (MN II 913). Like the Father in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore and like Giuncano and Nane Papa, Donata recognises that life through action in the real world is

a trap which brings "la pena d'esser così e di non poter più essere altrimenti.":

Ora, compiere un atto, già non è mai tutto lo spirito che lo compie ... tutta la vita che è in noi... ma ciò che siamo solo in quel momento... - eppure ecco che quell'atto d'un momento - compiuto - c'imprigiona, ci ferma lì... con obblighi, responsabilità, in quel dato modo e non più altrimenti... E di tanti germi che potevano creare una selva, un germe solo cade lì, l'albero sorge lì, non potrà più muoversi di lì... tutto lì, per sempre... (MN II 914).⁵³

In this state of enforced 'oneness', she says to Elisa later, "è così difficile, impossibile trovarti tutta intera, sicura" (MN II 943). Donata finds oneness and plenitude through embracing many realities. What the theatre offers her is multiplicity and variety without the chaos or alienation which she experiences with Elj.⁵⁴

Paradoxically Donata and Elj are brought together through their shared rejection of the everyday but it is the sense of being hampered by others which breaks them up; they become each other's 'other' and the problems which Donata describes to Elisa set in:

Non c'è veramente, non ci può essere nulla di certo... La volontà, sì, la volontà di farcela, una vita, il bisogno di farla consistere in qualche modo, com'è possibile... - eh sì, com'è possibile, perché non dipende più da noi soltanto, ci sono gli altri - i casi - le condizioni - e chi ci sta più vicino - che possono contrariarci, ostacolarci - non sei più tu sola, in mezzo a tutto questo increato che vuol crearsi e non ci riesce - non sei più libera. E allora... allora dove la vita è creata liberamente, è là invece, nel teatro! (MN II 943).

In the theatre the interactions with others are predetermined. The actor is free to immerse himself in his part, with the illusion of participating in the real world without having to suffer the consequences of his actions or being hampered by others. The experience is similar to the "piacere della storia": "Allora il teatro. Almeno là si è sicuri che tutto avverrà come deve avvenire, sino alla fine..." (MN II 946).⁵⁵

The theatre offers Donata both the freedom to create herself and a structure which permits her to stand back from the process and 'keep her eyes open'. "Non comprendi più nulla, se t'abbandoni ad essa perdutamente"

(MN II 943). The verb 'comprendere' is significant in its ambivalence here. Donata needs a double perspective: to see herself as well as to lose herself in a role.

The parallels between acting and mysticism are quite explicit. When Elj asks her to live "In tanti modi" she immediately sees that this is what she has always done.⁵⁶ The life of "vagabondi", "senza bagagli", which he offers is, as she says, like the theatrical life: "non ho mai fatto altro finora!" (MN II 934)

It is when Donata returns to the stage that the mystical nature of the acting experience is most vividly expressed in the vocabulary, speech rhythms and repetitions found in the descriptions of explicit mystical experiences in Pirandello's work:

E d'improvviso, io non so, uno scatto qui dentro, e la liberazione! Ho dimenticato tutto - mi sono sentita prendere, prendere, sollevare - ho riavuto tutti i miei sensi, l'udito perduto, mi s'è fatto tutto chiaro, e sicuro, sicuro - ho riavuto la vita, ma così piena, così piena e così facile - in una soddisfazione di tanta ebbrezza, di tanta felicità, che ho sentito tutto accendersi, accendersi e vivere e sollevarsi con me!
(MN II 961-2).

The moment is not one of loss of self but, like those in Ionesco's work, one of fulfilment of the self. Just as the visionary moment can awaken a deep self and also give meaning to earthly life, so Donata's liberation acts on two levels: she finds herself again as an actress and as a woman; she achieves the "interezza di donna, nella vita" which was lacking before in her theatrical life (MN II 962).⁵⁷ It is significant that she uses the same concept that she had used to summarise Elj's mysticism: "Questo lasciarsi prendere da..." (MN II 932)

Comparison with Enrico IV is useful here. After his awakening from real madness he is never totally at one with his role and he watches himself in it and contemplates it in an aesthetic manner. Donata in the end succeeds in living authentically both on the stage and in real life.

Unlike Enrico, she can still believe in her fictions.⁵⁸

Trovarsi can be seen as portraying two kinds of mystical experience. Elj's pantheistic mysticism is a liberation from the limitations of Form into the authenticity, freedom and flux of natural life. Donata's is a liberation from chaos into a sublime order. I am not suggesting that mysticism is the central subject of the play; rather that mystical structures are used to make a point about how different people 'centre' their lives. Such structures can be found in phenomena as diverse as passionate love and fascism. In a sense Pirandello is returning to the relativism of Così è (se vi pare) and the notion that the individual's 'certainty' or way of centering his life is his own private business. As Donata says, "non è possibile trovarsi fuori di quel sentimento che ci dà la certezza - sicura - almeno di noi stessi!" (MN II 963). This echoes a "battuta" made earlier in the play by Salò that "C'è soltanto da negare che la 'normalità' delle galline possa intendere il volo disperato d'una gru" (MN II 908). With this re-statement of the individual's right to create his own reality according to his nature and needs, Pirandello inevitably concludes with the theme of human solitude:

Non ci si trova alla fine che soli. - Fortuna che si resta coi nostri fantasmi, più vivi e più veri d'ogni cosa viva e vera, in una certezza che sta a noi soli raggiungere, e che non può mancarci! (MN II 964).⁵⁹

The ambiguity of form which in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore is expressed using the device of the metaplay, is here suggested through the pattern of contrasts and similarities between the mystical figure and the actress. The visionary and the actor are closely fused in Enrico IV too.

Trovarsi also develops the idea of the theatre as a place for communion with diverse realities. In its origins the theatre was concerned with the mysteries of life and death, with religious experiences and man's relations with the Gods and fate (the cosmic element of his existence) and

acting was associated with contacting and becoming possessed by another world in a trance or in 'inebriation'. Robert Corrigan concludes a description of the 'other-worldly' connotations of theatrical vocabulary by quoting a modern actress who in effect sums up Donata's experience. "You transcend to the character and she takes you through her journey. What you seek is to be possessed".⁶⁰

II (ii) I giganti della montagna

Although Pirandello said that Uno, nessuno e centomila represented a kind of 'summa' or 'compte rendu' of his work, I think a good case can be made for seeing I giganti della montagna as not only fulfilling this role too but as doing so in a new theatrical idiom. The play can be seen to be about Art in general or the theatre in particular, subjects which inevitably, as in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore, lead to discussion about the nature of reality and illusion. But as ever, Pirandello is concerned with how people give coherence to their lives and react to despair, and so the old themes of mystical withdrawal and of fanaticism are present. The play pushes to an extreme the notions of creative invention present in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore; the materialisation of Madama Pace is particularly relevant. This familiar material is presented in a fantastical, surrealistic idiom mixed with elements of realism and 'umorismo'. The mystical features of the play are present in its characters, its setting and, as in Trovarsi and Non si sa come, represent an ontological choice.

The two main characters, Ilse and Cotrone, represent two types of "dimissionario". Ilse is a typical Pirandellian fanatic or "monoideist" – someone seeking plenitude/death in a single idea. Her single-minded obsession with the work of the dead poet/lover has ruined the Company and bankrupted her husband. Although she is ostensibly an actress in search of an audience, her real aim is to expiate her guilt through devotion to the text. Ilse also uses this obsession to withdraw from her sexuality and marriage.

By contrast Cotrone is a man who has rejected audiences and withdrawn from life, not into a single reality but into infinite realities and a state of complete openness. He is a self-styled "dimissionario", having donned a fez to symbolise his recognition of "il fallimento della poesia

della cristianità" (MN II 1329):

Potevo essere anch'io, forse, un grand'uomo, Contessa. Mi sono dimesso. Dimesso da tutto: decoro, onore, dignità, virtù, cose tutte che le bestie, per grazia di Dio, ignorano nella loro beata innocenza. Liberata da tutti questi impacci, ecco che l'anima ci resta grande come l'aria, piena di sole o di nuvole, aperta a tutti i lampi, abbandonata a tutti i venti, superflua e misteriosa materia di prodigi che ci solleva e disperde in favolose lontan-
anze (MN II 1345).

Abandonment of civic life has inevitably meant poverty but Cotrone and the Scalognati stress the fact that loss of possessions of a material kind brings psychological wealth and freedom. They live in the "squisito privilegio, che è la mendicizia" evoked in typical mystical terms: "Padroni di niente e di tutto." "Non si può aver tutto, se non quando non si ha più niente." "E solo quando non hai più casa, tutto il mondo diventa tuo. Vai e vai, poi t'abbandoni tra l'erba al silenzio dei cieli; e sei tutto e sei niente... e sei niente e sei tutto" (MN II 1344). Cotrone's rejection of civic life is also a rejection of reason: "Non bisogna più ragionare. Qua si vive di questo" (MN II 1340). The condition of the Scalognati is consequently described as madness with the usual Pirandellian sense of openness to all realities. "Non è più un gioco, ma una realtà meravigliosa in cui viviamo, alienati da tutto, fino agli eccessi della demenza" (MN II 1345) and "Quando si è pazzi, tutto è possibile" (MN II 1314). Also typical of Pirandello's mysticism here is the rejection of the body and of language as false; the inner life is the locus of authenticity:

Guardiamo alla terra, che tristezza! C'è forse qualcuno laggiù che s'illude di star vivendo la nostra vita; ma non è vero. Nessuno di noi è nel corpo che l'altro ci vede; ma nell'anima che parla chi sa da dove; nessuno può saperlo: apparenza tra apparenza, con questo buffo nome di Cotrone... e lui, di Quaquèo... Un corpo è la morte: tenebra e pietra. Guai a chi si vede nel suo corpo e nel suo nome (MN II 1345).

The Scalognati have not thrown off civic life and reason for the sake of a single and fixed notion of the beyond. The play celebrates every kind of beyond imaginable. It takes place, as Pirandello says, on a kind of

transcendental plane of reality: "Tempo e luogo indeterminato: al limite fra la favola e la realtà" (MN II 1307). Cotrone confirms "siamo qua come agli orli della vita" (MN II 1337).

The Villa itself is the meeting place of all kinds of Beyonds. Firstly the beyond within man dreams, fantasies, imaginings, the irrational. The human dream life is bodied forth during the waking state. "I sogni, la musica, la preghiera, l'amore... tutto l'infinito ch'è negli uomini, lei lo troverà dentro e intorno a questa villa" (MN II 1337). La Sgricia has retreated there because it is the only place where people believe the miracle which she witnessed. The Villa was abandoned because it was believed to be haunted by Spirits. It embraces the repressed areas of the mind: "Tutte quelle verità che la coscienza rifiuta" summoned up "dal segreto dei sensi,... dalle caverne dell'istinto" (MN II 1343-4). Mundane reality is here transformed: "Con questi miei amici m'ingegno di sfumare sotto diffusi chiarori anche la realtà di fuori, versando, come in fiocchi di nubi colorate, l'anima, dentro la notte che sogna" (MN II 1344). Cotrone also refers to an 'Other' world of a more mythical kind which 'blinkered' human perception cannot see:

L'orgoglio umano è veramente imbecille, scusate. Vivono di vita naturale sulla terra, signor Conte, altri esseri di cui nello stato normale noi uomini non possiamo aver percezione, ma solo per difetto nostro dei cinque nostri limitatissimi sensi. Ecco che, a volte, in condizioni anormali, questi esseri ci si rivelano e ci riempiono di spavento. Sfido: non ne avevamo supposto l'esistenza! Abitanti della terra non umani, signori miei, spiriti della natura, di tutti i generi, che vivono in mezzo a noi, invisibili, nelle rocce, nei boschi, nell'aria, nell'acqua, nel fuoco: lo sapevano bene gli antichi: e il popolo l'ha sempre saputo; lo sappiamo bene noi qua, che siamo in gara con loro e spesso li vinciamo, assoggettandoli a dare ai nostri prodigi, col loro concorso, un senso che essi ignorano o di cui non si curano (MN II 1361-2).

The Villa recalls Ionesco's "anti-monde" in the way it reverses normal rules and values. Here priority is given to the invisible or immaterial over the material: "crediamo alla realtà dei fantasmi più che a quella dei

corpi" (MN II 1361). This is the reverse of the positivist world: "Se lei, Contessa, vede ancora la vita dentro i limiti del naturale e del possibile, l'avverto che lei qua non comprenderà mai nulla. Noi siamo fuori di questi limiti, per grazia di Dio" (MN II 1362). This world is not accessible to reason; the truth is simply whatever issues from the mind, in a way that might well appeal to Ionesco: "io ho sempre inventate le verità", says Cotrone (MN II 1342). In search of the alternative reality, the Scalognati turn inwards as well as outwards. In their Villa the human spirit is whole, at one with itself because the outer world is an embodiment of the inner one. "I fantasmi... non c'è mica bisogno d'andarli a cercare lontano: basta farli uscire da noi stessi" (MN II 1341). This is the miraculous place where the problems of all authors, artists and Pirandello's six characters are non-existent: there is no need for mediation, form or representation. Intention and creation are co-extensive and simultaneous: "A noi basta immaginare e subito le immagini si fanno vive da sé. Basta che una cosa sia in noi ben viva, e si rappresenta da sé, per virtù spontanea della sua stessa vita. È il libero avvento d'ogni nascita necessaria" (MN II 1362). The Villa is therefore a place where reality is independent of 'others'. Truth does not have to be corroborated. The Scalognati, like children, can immerse themselves entirely in their own inventions: "Con la divina prerogativa dei fanciulli che prendono sul serio i loro giuochi, la meraviglia ch'è in noi la rovesciamo sulle cose con cui giochiamo, e ce ne lasciamo incantare" (MN II 1345).

Clearly the mystical experience (in the loosest sense of the word) of the play is far removed from that in which the self is lost in the Absolute or All. Here, the individual becomes inebriated with his own inner world or "in un'altra verità, lontana dalla sua, pur così labile e mutevole..." (MN II 1340) There is something in Cotrone's evocation of their state of mind which is both Dionysian and hallucinatory:

Privi di tutto, ma con tutto il tempo per noi: ricchezza indecifrabile, ebullizione di chimere. Le cose che ci stanno attorno parlano e hanno senso soltanto nell'arbitrario in cui per disperazione ci viene di cangiarle. Disperazione a modo nostro, badiamo! Siamo piuttosto placidi e pigri; seduti, concepiamo enormità, come potrei dire, mitologiche; naturalissime, dato il genere della nostra esistenza. Non si può campare di niente; e allora è una continua sbornatura celeste. Respiriamo aria favolosa. Gli angeli possono come niente calare in mezzo a noi; e tutte le cose che ci nascono dentro sono per noi stessi uno stupore. Udiamo voci, risa; vediamo sorgere incanti figurati da ogni gomito d'ombra, creati dai colori che ci restano scomposti negli occhi abbacinati dal troppo sole della nostra isola. Sordità d'ombra non possiamo soffrirne. Le figure non sono inventate da noi; sono un desiderio dei nostri stessi occhi (MN II 1340).

The reference to despair is interesting in the context of this thesis. The "Scalognati" are the "Accursed". The implication is perhaps that for the desperate and the misfortunate the only freedom or solution is in the mind or the imagination, a notion explored by Pirandello in novelle such as "Il treno ha fischiato", "Rimedio: la Geografia", "La maestrina Boccarmé" and "Mondo di carta".

The problem in I giganti della montagna is not merely the fact of its incomplete state but also the existence of two secondhand accounts of Pirandello's intentions in addition to those given to journalists between 1928 and 1929. These interviews are the earliest indications we have of Pirandello's plans for I giganti della montagna which he worked on between 1929 and the night of his death in 1936. It is clearly based, like much of his early work, on the clash of opposites – body and soul, matter and spirit. As Pirandello himself said, "un mondo spirituale e un nuovo mondo materialistico", and "contrasti fra l'umanità che pensa e quella che vive di forza".⁶¹

Stefano Pirandello's account of his father's intentions, dictated the day Pirandello died, suggests that the final tragedy arises because of a breakdown in communication between Art and Life: Art has separated itself from the lives of those to whom it is addressed and who cannot consequently

relate to it. Art has become hermetic and decadent:

Non è, non è che la Poesia sia stata rifiutata; ma solo questo: che i poveri servi fanatici della vita, in cui oggi lo spirito non parla, ma potrà pur sempre parlare un giorno, hanno innocentemente rotto, come fantocci ribelli, i servi fanatici dell'Arte, che non sanno parlare agli uomini perché si sono esclusi dalla vita,... (MN II 1375).

Marta Abba however, thought that Pirandello intended to lay the blame entirely on the brutality and coarseness of the Giants and that the play was therefore a celebration of Art and the imagination. Pirandello wrote to Abba saying "I so wish you could feel what I am doing with I giganti della montagna! I have taken your advice to heart. I giganti della montagna is the triumph of the imagination! The triumph of poetry, and at the same time the tragedy of poetry forced to exist in the midst of the brutal modern world."⁶²

While John B. Rey appears to come down firmly on Marta Abba's side, calling Stefano Pirandello's ending "facile", Tim Fitzpatrick, focusing closely on Ilse and her relationship with Cotrone, makes a good case for seeing the Giants as one of Cotrone's spells aimed at purging Ilse of her guilt, through a symbolic death. The play becomes for Fitzpatrick a celebration of the power of the theatre.⁶³ Different conclusions may be drawn about the play depending on whose account is believed and on whether priority is given to the theatrical or psychological aspects of the plot. My contribution to this mêlée consists of taking into account two related features of the play's conditions of production.

It is an important fact, I believe, that Pirandello wrote the play over a period of 7 years and that Acts 1 and 2 were published separately. The statements of intention given to journalists were all made early on in the play's conception and if they are compared with what is actually found in the play, it is clear that its substance is far more complicated than a simple struggle between matter and spirit. Focusing on the artistic

struggle, as Strehler does, it is possible to see a four-part battle between Cotrone, Ilse, the Giants and Cromo, with each party representing a different idea of theatre.⁶⁴

Most critics see the play as the product of a single, unchanging authorial intention. It makes sense, perhaps, to consider that the reason for Pirandello's trouble with the play and his ultimate failure to complete it lay in the fact that his idea of it changed. There is direct evidence for this in the letter quoted above where he says that he had listened to Marta Abba's advice. It would seem reasonable to assume that, as Ionesco often does, he had given birth to an idea which he had trouble developing and whose ultimate significance remained a mystery to him or was too complex to embody in dramatic form. Pirandello seems to have been trying to convey a whole vision here and was not merely working from a single, fixed idea.

A second temporal factor influencing the evolution of the play was the worsening political climate. We have seen that the theme of mystical withdrawal from life runs through much of Pirandello's later work and that he had questioned the very possibility, in practical terms, of such a stance. As the world moved towards another war it is possible that Pirandello may have been disturbed by the morality of withdrawal. He had already given himself licence to offer withdrawal as a choice by labelling the play a 'myth', admitting openly that the play's premise is unreal and Cotrone's lifestyle pure fantasy. Cotrone himself casts doubt on the rightness of what he has to offer the Actors: "Loro sono stati indirizzati a me da un mio lontano amico, che probabilmente non ha fatto a tempo, o non ha trovato il modo, di comunicare a loro il consiglio ch'io gli davo d'impedire che s'avventurassero fin qua" (MN II 1330). For the individual to shut himself in a fantasy world is one thing but for Art to do so would result in the whole communicative dimension of Art being lost. In the end

I do not see that celebrating the power of art and imagination, and pointing out that such things cannot become co-extensive with reality are mutually exclusive aims. That Pirandello was preoccupied with the problem of Art's relation to everyday life is evident in the "Introduzione al teatro italiano" which he published in the last year of his life. There he stated that the theatre cannot have universal and eternal value unless it accepts the world of ordinary existence.⁶⁵ It is important that he is speaking particularly of the theatre in that essay, that is, of an art form which is destined to be fleshed out and performed on a stage in front of an audience. It might not be too far-fetched perhaps to deduce from this that in the more 'private' forms of the novel and 'novella' fantasy may be indulged more rightly if not more successfully.

I cannot agree with John B. Rey's contention that Stefano Pirandello's solution is "facile". It is rather the hardest solution because it remains 'open' and in this is entirely in keeping with Pirandello's dialectical, dual vision throughout his work - a 'doubleness' which this study of visionary experience has shown to be the lynchpin of his art. The difficulty of realising in theatrical terms the less dogmatic solution to the dilemma would seem to be evident in the fact that, from what little information we do have about Pirandello's plans for the ending, he had recourse to a symbol. As we saw at the end of Le Solitaire, the symbol may be seen as a device for expressing the inexpressible, or, more cynically, it can offer an easy way out of a situation which may not be clear even to the author. The symbol Pirandello had in mind was that of the olive tree.⁶⁶ Again as at the close of Le Solitaire the tree symbol is called upon to evoke the linking or transcendence of incongruent modes of experience.

The 'impossible' nature of mysticism as a permanent stance is also explicit in the very early novella, "Sogno di Natale", where the visionary

element is unusually given a Christian setting. Here the framework of a dreamed encounter with Jesus indicates the artificiality or hypothetical nature of the choice. The narrator is absorbed into the Christ figure, "allora mi parve di far con lui una persona sola" (NA II 1084), and as they fly above the streets together, they observe the world from a 'cosmic' perspective. When, finally, Jesus asks him to make a choice: to cast away "quel che falsamente stimi necessario a te e ai tuoi" (NA II 1086) and follow him, fulfilment is offered, as in "La mano del malato povero", at the price of abandoning the world and all security and comfort: "La città, Gesù? - io risposi sgomento. - E la casa e i miei cari e i miei sogni?" (NA II 1086). The narrator is unable to transmute the moment of vision into a way of being.

In conclusion, it is important always to distinguish between the vision as momentary experience, and mysticism as a source of permanent transparency and plenitude. There is always something in Pirandello's writing to indicate that the latter, in real terms, is an impossibility. The central character may be destitute, having no care, as a visionary, for material comfort. ("La mano del malato povero", Simone Lampo in "Fuoco alla paglia", Spatolino of "Il tabernacolo"). Or he may be released from the practical necessity of earning a living by a private income. Amongst Pirandello's visionaries, Elj, the Scalognati, Enrico IV and Vitangelo Moscarda all have such subsidies while Ionesco's 'solitaire' has "cet héritage inattendu". This has almost become a characteristic of 'outsider' literature. Sartre's Roquentin has no need to work and can devote himself full-time to writing and observing. Musil's Ulrich takes a year off work in order to cogitate. The first modern outsider (also a model for Sartre's protagonist), Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, is allowed to retire from the civil service thanks to a sudden inheritance. Another exceptional circumstance is that of imminent death.

Sometimes where a character believes he has solved the problem of duality and achieved unity, a double perspective in the narrative effectually maintains the tension and status quo. A humoristic narrative such as "Sole e ombra" may maintain the double perspective by referring the reader's attention away from the ponderous issues to the petty and incongruous details of the real world. In Uno, nessuno e centomila, the first person narrative contradicts the content. The style of writing which emerges from this nonsensical inspiration is euphoric and whimsical. It is charged with a buoyant irony which is a variant of transcendental farce. The doubleness does not arise from simultaneous representation and parody but results from the first person narrator undermining the credibility of his own "finale catarsi mistica". De Castris is quite wrong in viewing this as an aberration of Pirandello's later years and in seeing it as showing "il limite sentimentale ed artistico del tentativo pirandelliano".⁶⁷ This is a vein of "umorismo" which is recognisable from earlier works such as "Quand'ero matto..." and "Da sé". The fact that a dream story and a myth are to be found at each end of his writing career shows that the literary hypothesis too is an integral part of his art.

II (iii) La Soif et la faim

La Soif et la faim follows the same basic pattern as Le Piéton de l'air in that the protagonist leaves his familiar and habitual surroundings, travels for a while beyond those limits and then returns to give an account of what he has seen. But whereas Le Piéton de l'air focuses on the results of the journey, this play examines the psychological mechanisms which lie behind the protagonist's 'hunger and thirst' and looks at the different avenues down which the human desire for a beyond leads people. The play also examines the morality of rejecting life, whether in the form of a solitary quest or in the form of abdicating one's freedom to social pressures. La Soif et la faim takes as its central subject what is nascent in Le Piéton de l'air, the individual's quest for plenitude in the context of love and social relations, here represented again by the family group.

Although the play is cyclical in terms of the moods of the acts – enclosure, space, enclosure, enclosure – there is also a sense in which each act replicates all the others resulting in a juxtaposition of different kinds of confinement. In the first act Jean is, or rather perceives himself to be confined by his familial ties and domesticity. In the second act he is dependent on another person for his next move. The third act features the symbol of the wall, representing the limits of human knowledge and consciousness while the final one concerns social constraints.

The Ionescan symbolism of heaviness and confinement predominates at the beginning of the play where Jean, Marie-Madeleine and their daughter Marthe return to their old damp basement room, the outward expression of Jean's state of mind. The room sinking into mud and water has a number of associations. Marie-Madeleine describes it as "la maison de l'habitude" (TH IV 81). It is also "mal fréquentée", Jean being visited or haunted by figures from the past: Tante Adélaïde, who claims no one took her seriously, and the memory of a woman burning and reaching out to him in

agony. Jean would seem to be ridden with guilt for the past failure to respond to people's dilemmas effectively:

Hélas, ce n'est pourtant pas moi qui ai tué tante Adélaïde."
(TH IV 91).

Éteins vite que je ne voie plus cette femme qui brûle dans les flammes. Elle apparaît dès que tu allumes le feu. Regarde-la, avec ses cheveux qui brûlent. Elle apparaît ainsi, avec son visage désespéré... elle me tend les bras dans son supplice. Toujours, depuis qu'elle m'a tendu les bras de la même façon, puis a disparu dans la fumée; elle est devenue cendres à mes pieds; elle renaît de ses cendres chaque fois comme un reproche. Je n'ai pas eu le courage de me jeter dans les flammes (TH IV 93).

Instead of this oppressive, claustrophobic state of mind, Jean wants space and light.⁶⁸ "Je n'aime que les maisons avec des murs et des toits transparents, ou même sans murs et sans toit..." (TH IV 79-80). A house perched high up on a mountain above a river is not just a symbol of freedom. Given that the sunken room is tomb-like, a house in the sky signifies freedom from the fear of death. "Il y a des maisons qui se font oublier d'être des tombeaux. Il suffit qu'on y aperçoive le ciel. Le ciel vous console de vivre, il vous console de mourir" (TH IV 81). The new room is also cursed by time, for Marie-Madeleine looks older after only twenty minutes in it.

The quality of Jean's sensibility, underlined throughout the play, is his absolutism: "Ce n'est pas la paix que je veux, ce n'est pas le simple bonheur, il me faut une joie débordante, l'extase" (TH IV 82). He is also tormented by a desire for other realities, expressed in terms reminiscent of Donata Genzi and the protagonist of "La carriola":

Si je pouvais avoir les autres souvenirs! [...] Les souvenirs oubliés. Non! Pas même ceux-là. D'autres encore... Les souvenirs d'une vie que je n'ai pas vécue. Non, ce n'est pas ce que je veux dire: des souvenirs que je n'ai jamais eus, des souvenirs impossibles... (TH IV 92-3)

He refuses to settle down "comme les autres", in the belief that the present situation is not his true element, "mon existence est ailleurs" (TH IV 96). When he deserts his wife and child and sets off in search of "un

pays hygiénique où personne ne meurt", he has, like Mattia Pascal and Moscarda, to cast off all ties, relationships and contingencies so that he can focus entirely on himself:

Les liens, je les défais. Les noeuds, je les desserre. Pour ne pas qu'ils m'enterrent, c'est moi qui enterre les souvenirs. Je regrette la mémoire. J'en garde juste ce qu'il faut pour savoir qui je suis, j'oublie tout, sauf ceci: je ne suis rien d'autre que moi, je ne dois être que moi-même (TH IV 97-8).

Elsewhere Ionesco presents the search for the self as a means of contacting what is fundamental to all human beings but here Jean is seen to be behaving in a way that is less than human: "Je ne me sens solidaire des tourments de personne" (TH IV 94).

In this play Ionesco uses many of the images and motifs found in his earlier plays but puts them to a new purpose. More than simply expressing his states of mind he is casting a critical and dispassionate eye over the whole sensibility which has informed his work to date.

The juxtaposition of situations of confinement makes Jean's quest a fruitless one and bases the play on stasis rather than dynamic progress. The futility is deepened because the exposition of Jean's character in the first episode prepares the audience for his failure. Although Jean grumbles about the room he has returned to, Marie-Madeleine points out that it was his decision to return there. He is restless and dissatisfied wherever he is: "Si ce n'est pas l'agoraphobie, c'est la claustrophobie" (TH IV 77), and "Toujours quelque chose te manque" (TH IV 81). Jean is seen to be suffering from that common Romantic malady "erreur d'âme" which Montaigne describes in his essay "De la présomption" and which Proust evokes accurately in "Un amour de Swann", the sickness of the mind which makes the sufferer long for everything which is beyond his grasp and scorn what lies within reach; in a state of perpetual expectation, he strains towards the future.⁶⁹ "Je ne peux vivre que dans l'espoir que l'extraordinaire va naître. [...] J'ai vécu surtout dans l'espoir du renouvelle-

ment et de l'alternance des saisons. Ici, une seule saison morne, mélange d'automne et d'hiver" (TH IV 81-2). He locates his problem in his continual awareness of the wider world. "Je suis lucide. Cela est incurable" (TH IV 92). This prevents him from accepting and settling down in something which he knows is not total and all-embracing. "Vous tenez une grande place", he tells his wife, but "L'univers est encore plus grand, ce qui me manque, plus grand encore" (TH IV 83).

Throughout the first episode Jean's hunger and thirst are contrasted with Marie-Madeleine's acceptance of the present and her ability to look at it in a positive light. She accuses Jean of failing to see the world in its 'density' because of his desire to see its broad totality. "Tu ne regardes pas assez autour de toi. Tu ne regardes pas attentivement" (TH IV 83). Whereas she finds beauty in the shapes made by the damp patches on the wall, Jean sees horrific sights. Jean solves problems by moving away from them while Marie-Madeleine believes in using her inner resources: "Je chaufferai la maison avec la chaleur de mon coeur. [...] J'éclairerai avec la lumière de mes yeux" (TH IV 81). Marie-Madeleine also draws on human relationships as a source of happiness: "Pourvu que je sois avec toi, je n'ai pas peur de mourir" (TH IV 82). She sees them as bonds while Jean calls them chains.

Ionesco has used contrasting imagery before to suggest conflict between couples. But whereas in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser the important element is the fact of conflict, in La Soif et la faim the antithetical images are associated with definite values. Marie-Madeleine is seen to be in the right or to be seeing clearly. This is a new role for the female figures in Ionesco's work although it is anticipated in Le Piéton de l'air in the sympathetic portrayal of Josephine's inner world and in the presentation of Marthe as someone with a gift for love.⁷⁰ Ionesco's criticism of his own mystical absolutism is suggested through the selfless-

ness and compassion of Marie-Madeleine. She exonerates him with her belief that he does not know himself: "S'il pouvait être conscient de l'amour qu'il nous porte!" (TH IV 83) and "S'il se voyait tel qu'il est, il s'apercevrait qu'il est beau;..." (TH IV 95).

The vision experienced by Marie-Madeleine after Jean has left, is presented in Ionesco's usual visionary images: a garden, flowering trees, green grass, blue sky and the symbols of passage or the linking of dimensions: "una échelle argentée, suspendue, dont on ne voit pas le sommet" (TH IV 103). So while Jean is off on his quest for the 'other', his wife is rewarded with "L'étonnement et la joie" in the here and now. La Soif et la faim can be seen as a deepening of Ionesco's usual pessimism for here he sees his anguish and restlessness not as the consequence of an objective state of affairs in the outside world, but as a fault within himself. The flaws in Jean's character which are suggested in the first episode recur in the subsequent ones.

The second episode finds Jean well beyond human reality. He not only speaks constantly in terms of landscapes but the setting is described as "Terrasse; elle a l'air suspendue dans le vide." (TH IV 105) which suggests isolation from reality. Although Jean perceives himself to be in "le royaume de la lumière" there are suggestions in the stage directions that this is an illusion, for although the sky clears when Jean enters, there is no brilliant light, rather "cela sera une lumière, sans ombre et sans soleil" and all around are "montagnes arides" (TH IV 105). Everything suggests a sterile, empty experience. Furthermore the terrace itself contrasts with the symbols of transcendence which closed the previous episode, because it does not lead anywhere.

His wait outside the museum for an unknown woman carries suggestions of the distant, idealised love of the troubadours. The recurring imagery of museums and monuments would seem to be linked to Jean's religious quest

for something primal and timeless while suggesting a static, and secondhand type of knowledge. There is the idea too of the museum as the unconscious as Jean rediscovers images "enfouies quelque part dans la nuit de la mémoire" (TH IV 106).

Although Jean echoes the Béranger of Tueur sans gages in his joy, full knowledge still eludes him; the experience remains imprecise as he cannot remember the name of the woman he is waiting for. He claims to have found his essential self by deserting the world:

Je suis un autre et, pourtant, le même. Je m'étais perdu dans des choses. [...] Des fardeaux que je pensais être inhérents à moi-même. Nous ne sommes pas les choses que nous faisons; c'est pour cela que je peux m'en débarrasser et que je me retrouve intact (TH IV 107).

But his happiness is not complete. The woman's failure to meet him constitutes "un très léger nuage" in his sky. His state of 'waiting' is simply another kind of 'chain'. It would seem that it is not as easy to leave the world of relationships as it might seem. Jean's confusion and vagueness are reflected here in the word play: "L'absence que je ressens dans cette présence, le vide que je ressens dans cette plénitude ne peut être que son absence" (TH IV 111).

As he analyses his mistakes he realises that freedom from relationships can also mean chaos or formlessness. Life "délié de toutes attaches" is intense but dangerous. Jean now desires precisely what he has just abandoned:

Oh, messieurs les gardiens, j'étais confortablement installé dans l'inconfortable!... J'ai cherché l'accomplissement et je trouve la torture. J'avais le choix entre la sérénité et la passion; hélas, j'ai choisi la passion, inconscient que j'étais. Pourtant, j'étais à l'abri, bien enfermé dans ma tristesse, dans ma nostalgie, dans ma peur, dans mes remords, dans mon angoisse, dans ma responsabilité, à l'abri. C'était autant de murs qui m'entouraient. La crainte de la mort était mon bouclier le plus solide. Les murs se sont écroulés et me voici, vulnérable. Les murs se sont écroulés et me voici dans le feu torride de la vie, dans le lucide désespoir de la détresse. J'ai voulu la vie et la vie s'est jetée sur moi de toute sa force. Elle m'accable, elle me tue (TH IV 114).

This theme of the double value of 'walls' is not only very Pirandellian but it will be pursued in later episodes of the play. Having thought to satisfy his absolute desires by throwing off the superfluous Jean realises that he has in fact exacerbated those desires and discovered the nothingness of life:

Elle m'a réveillé à moi-même, elle est le besoin absolu; et moi qui croyais pouvoir me passer de tout! Bien sûr, bien sûr, il n'y a aucune raison de vivre. J'ai découvert pour vivre une déraison... Je m'y suis accroché et mes mains sont meurtries... (TH IV 117).

The experience of light has given him only a fleeting sense of wholeness not an abiding contact with an ultimate reality. Having recognised the foolishness of his quest to "conquérir le monde" Jean now seeks to find a cure for his 'illness': "Un mot suffirait pour me guérir" (TH IV 118). But he has so far detached himself from his roots that he is rendered aimless. The two keepers offer the same criticisms of Jean as were suggested in the first episode. When Jean begins to feel sorry for himself one of them asks "A-t-il eu pitié lui-même des autres?" (TH IV 115) This is just one aspect of his absolutist greed: "Le rien aurait dû le rassasier. Il a voulu tout avoir, le goinfre!" (TH IV 114).

The third episode at "le pied du mur" has an episodic structure, reminiscent of Le Piéton de l'air, and offers illustrations of a variety of existential stances. The Jeune Homme's attitude is one of indifference and acceptance of given limits: "Pour ma part je n'ai jamais essayé de percer ou de démolir ce mur, je n'ai jamais essayé de l'escalader, je le contourne simplement, je contourne tout le bâtiment" (TH IV 129). Jean's interest in going inside the 'monuments' is declared by the Jeune Homme to be 'touristic': "Vous avez la manie des monuments, des musées, des vieilles églises. En fait vous n'y pénétrez jamais. Vous restez aux portes ou bien au pied des murs" (TH IV 129).

Schaëffer in this episode appears, rather like the Architect of Tueur sans gages, in several roles: as a rabbi in charge of some children, tampering with beliefs, compromising with authority in order to survive; and returning as a group tourist guide which stands for 'collective' travel through life, whereas Jean by contrast defines himself as a "touriste libre" (TH IV 135). Schaëffer is associated by the Jeune Homme with tyranny: "D'une façon ou d'une autre, il faut qu'il commande, il faut qu'il persécute, il faut qu'il contraigne ou qu'il éduque" (TH IV 132). His mutability suggests also the way in which ideologies change with circumstances in order to remain attractive to people and therefore in control. The children in his charge finish up "dans le précipice" and can be seen to symbolise the victims of collective beliefs.

'Walls' are ambivalent; there will always be limits to knowledge, and there will always be chaos:

Les murs sont nos garants. Abattre un mur, c'est risqué; de toute façon, il faudrait en élever un autre plus loin. Ça recule insensiblement la limite. Le mur nous met à l'abri de l'inconnu, du chaos. C'est une façon de parler. Nous avons ici l'inconnu et le chaos. Mais c'est un chaos qui nous est devenu familier, auquel nous sommes habitués. Alors, je crois avoir mis un peu d'ordre, alors je crois le connaître. Cependant, qui peut empêcher le sol de s'effondrer, qui m'assure que le ciel ne va pas tomber sur ma tête? (TH IV 132).⁷²

Limits are necessary to human peace of mind but their fragility must always be remembered.

As predicted, beyond the wall Jean finds himself confronting another set of limits. It is significant that it is Schaëffer who makes the wall disappear because Jean seems to have returned within the conformist and hierarchical "établissement", the monastery-cum-prison-cum-barracks where he will be shown the chameleon qualities of beliefs and ideologies. With this powerful multivalent image, Ionesco suggests that religion, society, ideology and military orders are all manifestations of a single impulse. It is "la maison où l'on vient d'habitude" (TH IV 143) for people in search

of certainty. Its remoteness from the world (the monks ask "Comment va le monde?") conforms with Ionesco's notion that beliefs and systems exist at one remove from the raw material of reality.

When Jean has to give an account of his travels it becomes clear that although he may have seen much, it has made no lasting, significant impression on him. He can only list banalities and in his hurry to pursue the beyond has failed to take in any details. The monks ask in vain whether he has seen certain things, all of which have a faintly religious ring: "le chevalier d'un autre temps", "les sources lumineuses", "les temples aériens", "la Cour" (TH IV 149). His memories become more and more repetitive and fragmented as he gives in to increasing physical hunger and thirst: "ce trou que je ne puis combler.", "plus je mange, plus j'ai faim". Jean has simply let everything flow through him: "Il perd tout sur la route" (TH IV 150-1). It emerges that he has seen only vague shapes and meaningless figures in the mist; yet again he has failed to see and respond to a person in distress, and the conclusion of the interrogation is that his visions "ne sont pas lumineux" (TH IV 157), and he is prescribed "des gouttes visionnaires dans les yeux" (TH IV 153) before his next journey. In return for his co-operation, Frère Tarabas proposes a piece of entertainment to Jean which will also be instructive. Ronald Hayman is surely mistaken in seeing this play-within-the-play as remarkable "partly because it has so little to do with the central character".⁷³ In fact the inner play crystallises Jean's dilemma. He is shown two prisoners who hold opposing views and who both desire freedom. By playing on their physical and metaphorical hunger Tarabas succeeds in making them change their beliefs and so confirms the earlier words of the Jeune Homme about the factitious nature of beliefs. Much of what Tarabas says to the prisoners would seem to apply to the experiences of Jean. Freedom, it is implied, is a relative notion: "Il n'y a de liberté que provisoire. [...] De quoi

seriez-vous libres? De mourir de froid? Ici, vous êtes à l'abri" (TH IV 159). As an explanation of Jean's inability to be happy in the present, this is quite accurate: in the open spaces of the suspended terrace, the domestic confinement of the first episode seems infinitely more attractive. Furthermore, Tarabas' treatment of the two prisoners naturally links the fluidity of beliefs demonstrated in the metaplay with Jean's 'illness'. People with such cravings for certainty are vulnerable to the kind of manipulation demonstrated by Tarabas. The parallel between the questing figure and the two prisoners represents a pessimism new in Ionesco's work. He refers to the play as showing:

... le fait que toutes les croyances pour lesquelles nous nous battons sont équivalentes, que chacun s'il est mis dans une situation autre peut croire le contraire de ce qu'il a cru. Il y a là une sorte de nivellement des valeurs, ou de nihilisme (ECB 159).

This nihilism is particularly apparent in the interaction of Tarabas and Brechtoll. Tarabas would seem to embody the treacherous mechanisms of all oppressive systems and ideologies, particularly in his claim to offer intellectual freedom:

Il reste dans votre conscience des arrière-pensées, de vieilles habitudes qui s'accrochent à vous: systèmes, doctrines, dogmes, mythes, tics, automatismes mentaux qui vous accablent. Laissez-vous débarrasser des séquelles d'une éducation erronée; ah, c'est tenace! Elles sont têtues, les idées acquises. Lorsque vous vous serez défaits de vos lamentables préjugés, vous serez presque libres, ou, plutôt, préparés à la liberté (TH IV 160).

Tarabas is prepared to assume any colour of belief in order to bring others within his control. Having chastised Brechtoll with the accusation that "vous inventez une solidarité humaine improbable" (TH IV 170), it is precisely on these grounds that he appeals to Jean later. This type of ironic interaction reaches its extreme limit when Tarabas' manner of undermining Brechtoll's Brechtian beliefs proves their accuracy. The complex way in which the metaplay and the frame play interact produces a very Pirandellian piece of theatre in that the clear distinctions between

reality and illusion are blurred by the multiplicity of reflections and analogies. A further interesting and relevant effect of the inner play is that Jean is drawn into the fictitious action and begins to identify with the suffering of the two prisoners – something he signally failed to do when he deserted his wife.

When it is revealed that his debt to the 'monastery' will consist in serving the other monks who are "toujours affamés, comme vous", the parallel suggested by the play-within-the-play between the quester and those confined in an established order is consolidated.

Although Jean is still convinced that "Il me reste l'essentiel à découvrir" (TH IV 185) and wants to set out again to see "tout ce que je n'ai pas pu voir à cause de la faiblesse de ma vue" (TH IV 184), he does finally question the "étonnement indicible" which first brought on his hunger and thirst: "Devais-je ou non courir sur les routes de crépuscule et d'automne à la recherche de cette lumière... ou de ces mirages?" (TH IV 186).

At the moment of Jean's greatest confinement the vision from the first episode returns. For the first time Ionesco presents paradise not solely as an Edenic landscape but as also involving people. Here he reverses the usual pattern in his plays by showing the patience and love of the female protagonist to be more fruitful than the male's other-worldly absolutism. Marie-Madeleine embodies the values of compassion, human mutual support and fellowship. In Le Piéton de l'air, Joséphine is tried and found guilty of imprisoning her husband in her love and her need for him, and of distracting him from the essential. Here in La Soif et la faim human relationships are seen to be the foundation of a contact with the essential.

La Soif et la faim rejects the solitary, dynamic quest which aims to make permanent the light and fulfilment glimpsed in the visionary moment. The beyond cannot be made immediate (in the spatial sense) nor experienced

independently of the reality of which it is a beyond. Salvation is not to be sought outside of oneself and one's situation but emerges from the contemplation of what is already there. Jean ultimately realises that "vous [Marie-Madeleine and Marthe] avez toujours été dans cette lumière" (TH IV 189). Marie-Madeleine suggests using the 'given' situation as the basis for contemplation, recognising as some mystics do, that the light immanent in the earthly is hidden by human perceptual frameworks:

Marie-Madeleine: ... Tu vas voir, on se fait un nid de tout, on se couvre de ses nostalgies. On se nourrit de ses désirs, on boit la coupe d'espérance et on n'a plus soif. L'attente est une distraction. Les souvenirs que tu n'aimes pas, tu peux les adoucir, tu peux en faire un spectacle.... Si tu as une bonne vue, elle perce au-delà des murs....

Jean: Le vide que je ressens!

Marie-Madeleine: Ressér^e-le, ce vide. Tu en feras une plénitude.
(TH IV 94).

Jean has failed to scrutinise his own mental processes closely enough and has conceived ultimate reality as abstract. This is not only suggested by his vagueness about the Unknown woman in the second episode but above all by the image of the stemless flower used in the first episode to describe his idea of paradise. His luminous house will have "des visages de fleurs aux fenêtres, des fleurs dont ^{on} ne voit ni les racines, ni les tiges, seulement le haut de leurs visages, des fleurs à portée de la main" (TH IV 80). The image crystallises how he in effect fragments reality through his search for fullness. The suggestion that he was essentially attempting the impossible, to break the limits of human consciousness, was made as early as the first episode, "La conscience est un écran si étroit!" (TH IV 78). Ultimately he has become so addicted to the movement of the quest for the distant goal that he has ceased to observe what was right before him. "Je passais vite, je regardais droit devant moi, je vous dis, pour aller au but" (TH IV 153).

Ionesco's view of the relationship between the beyond and the earthly

appears to have shifted from the Eastern position of his early plays and Notes et contre-notes. The beyond is no longer wholly ultra-mundane and to be reached through the casting off of all forms and earthly ties, but is immanent. Richard Coe has rightly identified the new position as consistent with Judaic and Christian mysticism and points to the influence of Hasidism on Ionesco through readings of Martin Buber's Les Récits hassidiques (JM 100).⁷⁴

In Buber's Introduction to the Tales the blend of diverse mystical traditions is striking. "The core of hasidic teachings is the concept of a life of fervour, of exalted joy."⁷⁵ But this is not the imageless ecstasy of Introvertive mystics. The rapture is centred not on the ineffable beyond but on the "Now and Here" and arises from fulfilment in the present.⁷⁶ Hasidism satisfies Ionesco's need for immediate and eschatological plenitude.

Although the Hasidic divine is immanent, Buber stresses that this is in no way a brand of Extrovertive, nature mysticism:

It had nothing to do with pantheism which destroys or stunts the greatest of all values: the reciprocal relationship between the human and the divine, the reality of the I and the You which does not cease at the rim of eternity. Hasidism did however, make manifest the reflection of the divine, the sparks of God that glimmer in all beings and all things, and taught how to approach them, how to deal with them, how to "lift" and redeem them, and re-connect them with their original root.⁷⁷

In his emphasis on the relationship between the earthly and the divine and on the unity of the self within God, Buber's description of Hasidism can be seen to provide a solution to Ionesco's dualism:

Do not be vexed at your delight in creatures and things. But do not let it shackle itself to creatures and things, through these, press on to God.
.....

... all that is necessary is to have a soul united within itself and indivisibly directed to its divine goal.... How retain unity in the midst of peril and pressure, in the midst of thousands of disappointments and delusions? ⁷⁸

The mystical heterogeneity identifiable in Buber's Introduction is even stronger in one of Ionesco's references to Hasidism where he links love with the more Eastern idea of renewing consciousness:

La science de l'amour. Ni détruire les ennemis, car au fond il n'y a pas d'ennemi, il n'y a des ennemis que par erreur, ni fuir la terre, mais la purifier, c'est-à-dire rendre aux hommes une conscience éveillée. Unir le relatif à l'absolu,... (JM 147).

In La Soif et la faim, as in Pirandello's work, there is no going over wholly to a unitarian vision; there must always be a double perspective. A parallel with I giganti della montagna may be seen: in both plays the real world is not to be rejected wholesale for solipsistic withdrawal into the mind. This world and the beyond co-exist in a mutually illuminating tension.

II (iv) a L'Homme aux valises and Voyages chez les morts

These two plays must be mentioned here because they mark the final stage (to date) in Ionesco's search for a centre, and evince a change in dramatic style related to the new strategy of the search. Some of the traits of this new style invite comparison with Pirandello's I giganti della montagna. Voyages chez les morts, in particular, contains a strong mystical element in the form of allusions to the Gnostic religion, which has also influenced the structure and content of the play. With the exception perhaps of Le Roi se meurt, this is a new role for mysticism in Ionesco's work, and differs from the visionary theme explored in the main part of the thesis.

L'Homme aux valises and Voyages chez les morts mark the point in Ionesco's search where he ceases to scrutinise the outside world for the explanations which might give his life coherence and turns fully to the human mind – the imagination, the unconscious, dream, myth and memories. These have always been present in his work thematically and structurally but now the autobiographical quality comes into prominence and the settings are more obviously 'inward'. Ionesco begins going over his past, looking for archetypal patterns in it. Rather like I giganti della montagna, these two plays are set in a composite, multiple 'beyond' whose logic is essentially that of the dreaming mind: the action takes place beyond waking reality and also beyond earthly reality in a kind of underworld. Both protagonists encounter their ancestors in their search. Parallels with the Divine Comedy, the Odyssey and the Aeneid suggest themselves.

In L'Homme aux valises the characters and events are not as obviously personal as in the later play. The general setting of Ionesco's life is recognisable: the rootlessness of twentieth century Europe, racial persecution, totalitarianism, the Soviet 'clinics'. The corollary of the loss of origins symbolised by the image of a man carrying cases is loss of

identity. Without a geographical origin, Ionesco's "Premier Homme" is at the mercy of 'bureaucratical identity', the need for papers and documents. The sense of a general lack of direction is dramatised in the final image of characters bustling around the stage. The search for origins is suggested in the character's title - "Premier Homme". He is attempting to find the essence of life and calls himself "un existant". "Je veux connaître mon origine. Je veux la connaître à tout prix" (TH VI 22). By contrast, his old friends have all given themselves over to business and have no time for his quest. "Nous ne pouvons pas nous occuper de cet homme et de ses angoisses. Nous avons trop de choses à faire" (TH VI 40).

There are two types of archetypes in these plays. On the one hand Ionesco's personal "archetypes", the images and ideas and situations which haunt him and which he seems to have shuffled like a pack of cards throughout his work in the hope that some pattern might emerge from them. In both plays we find the image of the burning house, the symbolic use of rooms and houses and the image of a tree. The second set of archetypes are ancient mythical figures and references and also some figures from the twentieth century who may well become mythical for future generations. In an attempt to find the universal and eternal within his own life Ionesco has mixed his modern, personal archetypes with the ancient. The Charon-like boatman at the beginning of L'Homme aux valises shares the scene with a stereotypical French painter sitting by the Seine in the middle of a city which is both Paris and Venice.⁷⁹ The date is given as 1938 but a parallel is made with 1789 and the painter appears to have foreknowledge of the war. We are in some kind of timeless zone where the Sphinx mingles with modern Proustian 'archetypes' and a landscape of "aubépines" and "fraises des bois" is linked with Ionesco's own childhood paradise, La Chapelle Anthenaïse, in Scene XVI.⁸⁰ Whereas Pirandello tried to create new myths by writing his own material in a "timeless" form drawing on the miraculous, Ionesco

attempts to relate his own life and the background of the 20th century to the mythical worlds of the distant past.

Although the play is unified by the protagonist's quest, the structure is fragmented. There is often no link between scenes; characters appear and disappear without any dramatic reason. They are ciphers whose *raison d'être* lies in the dream. The lack of a causal plot and of dramatic shape conveys a sense of chaos and loss of roots.

Voyages chez les morts is in many ways an intensification of the dramatic style of L'Homme aux valises. The dream material seems more raw; the juxtaposition of modern and ancient, personal and mythical, philosophical and trite, is starker and the text is full of repetitions and echoes.⁸¹ The result is an intense sense of obsession and interiority. One is reminded particularly of Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore in which Pirandello purged himself of the characters who haunted him in the dark corners of his study. Both plays are in a sense exercises in psychodrama. The members of Ionesco's family wrangle and torment each other suspended in Ionesco's dreams just as Dante's characters are suspended in Hell and Pirandello's in the fixed form of art. The Mother's attack on Madama Pace finds a parallel in Ionesco's play with the Grandmother's trial, judgement and 'stripping' of Ionesco's step-mother. In Jean's re-lived encounter with Alexandre's girlfriend, his tenses swing between past and present in a way reminiscent of Pirandello's "avviene ora, avviene sempre". In Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore Pirandello transcended what he considered to be material lacking in higher meaning by adding another layer of drama and giving deep metaphorical resonances to the action. Ionesco does the reverse: he takes the jealousies and the lust for renown and the sense of injustice done to his mother and attempts to exalt them to the status of myth by linking them up with a vaguely Jungian anima quest and with the structure of an ancient religion.

II (iv) b Gnosticism

It is not difficult to see why Ionesco was fascinated by the Gnostic religion which has been seen as an ancestor of modern Existentialism.⁸²

The root of the name is gnosis – knowledge – but the religion emphasised knowledge of God as a means to salvation or even the very form of salvation. This knowledge was not theoretical, philosophical or dogmatic knowledge but more a mode of experience, a radical kind of revelation or illumination which for some sects meant union with God, the Knower at one with the object of his knowledge:

It is by means of Unity that each one shall receive himself back again. Through knowledge he shall purify himself of diversity with a view to Unity, by engulfing (devouring) the Matter within himself like a flame, Darkness by Light and Death by Life.⁸³

The Gnostic cosmos is radically dualistic in that God is utterly trans-mundane and acosmic, and hidden from man to such a degree that his nature can only be referred to in negatives. In a manner which sounds Beckettian to the modern reader, he is called the Other, the Unknown, the Nameless, the Hidden. The unspeakability of the knowledge or of God leads, as in much of Ionesco's writing, to speculation full of paradox and repeated declarations of the limits of language.⁸⁴ As the theological scholar Hans Jonas says, "in the failure of reason and speech he becomes revealed; and the very account of the failure yields the language for naming him.... The knowledge of him itself is the knowledge of his unknowability;..."⁸⁵ As in the Absurd experience, the Absolute is uncovered through reaching the limits of human verbal and conceptual powers.

There was no single movement called 'Gnosticism' nor a group of people who called themselves 'Gnostics'. There was only a number of systems which were given expression during a period of intense cross-fertilisation between different traditions of thought and belief. The fundamental

element of all the systems and speculations known as 'Gnostic' today was the doctrine that the world is bad. God is so alien to it that he is not even its creator (though the Valentinian speculation saw its existence as a result of a rift within the Godhead itself). Rather, the world is the work of demonic forces governed by the Demiurge, which obstruct knowledge of God. The cosmos is essentially a vast prison made of concentric spheres all standing between God and man on earth. The size and multiplicity of the cosmos are an index of human alienation through the dispersed state of 'ignorance'. Images of imprisonment and capture are germane to gnostic writing.

Ignorance is not simply a 'lack' or absence but is a condition in its own right. The world and its cosmic rulers attempt to draw man away from 'the Unknown' into the inebriation of earthly life. The world is seen as making a noise which drowns the "heavenly voices" calling man to Life. But just as the Absurd experience can both oppress and liberate, so this noise can frighten man out of his earthly slumbers into awareness and make him lift "his eyes to the place of light".

An interesting feature of Gnosticism is the way in which ignorance and dispersal (and therefore also their opposites, knowledge and unity) are qualities both of the universe and of individual human existence. The human condition mimics the metaphysical one: just as there are seven spheres in the cosmos separating earth from God, so the being of man consists of spirit (pneuma or spark) – a part of the divinity – immured within seven soul vestments and the body. Salvation necessarily consists in the overcoming or dissolution of the world of matter, the release of the pneuma and its return to the Godhead. In the Valentinian speculation the notion of matter as more than a physical condition but as a part of the more metaphysical state of ignorance reaches its utmost conclusion with the perception that each individual event of enlightenment and awakening is

also a cosmic event which affects the state of the Divinity itself in that it helps to unite the whole world with him. A consequence of this vision of the cosmos was a loathing of the body and of nature. All worldly matters were held in contempt in one of two ways: asceticism or libertinism.

The language in which the human condition was expressed sounds strikingly modern. Dread and forlornness are man's basic reactions to being "thrown into the body-stump".⁸⁶ Expressions of sinking and falling into bodily existence in the world of matter find a parallel in Ionesco's experience of 'enlissement'. The very tone of some Gnostic writings is also reminiscent of Ionesco's journals; lamentations and insistent questioning give a directness to their sense of being abandoned in a strange element.

How long shall I wander, and how long sink within all the worlds?

Why did ye carry me away from my abode into captivity and cast me into the stinking body?⁸⁷

Gnostic thought contains two 'reversals' which are also characteristic of Absurdist literature. Human existence is conceived as a kind of sleep or numbness.⁸⁸ The true, full life is beyond death. Physical life and the earthly world are seen as an underworld, the habitation of the 'dead'.

"Who has thrown me into the suffering of the worlds, who has transported me to the evil darkness?"⁸⁹ To be cast "into the body-garment" is to be plunged into darkness with no awareness of Light. The aim of the Gnostic is to uncover the transcendental spirit of man, discover its destiny and thereby withdraw it from 'diversity' and 'dispersal'. As the spirit rises through the spheres it declares to the keepers of each level "I have come to know myself and have gathered myself from everywhere ..."⁹⁰

What liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth.⁹¹

The pursuit of his true being and of knowledge of its destiny and origin is

of paramount importance in Ionesco's work. Just as he attempts to dissolve reality around him in order to keep the world at bay and thereby keep in touch with his essential, universal Self, so the Gnostic fears the world will inebriate him and suppress awareness of his true being. The fact that the cosmos and the birth of man were not the responsibility of the transcendent God had a significant effect on behaviour, for the Gnostics had no theory of virtue. Salvation was not the result of right behaviour in earthly matters but rather of grace.

A striking feature of the Gnostic spiritual path is its resemblance to that of the Absurdist experience: awakening is followed by terror, questioning and finally joy.⁹² The discovery of human alienation in the cosmos is a prelude to the discovery of the transcendental Self and the Absolute. There exists an intimate link, as in Ionesco's work, between the pessimistic view of the world as fragmented and strange, and the possibility of liberation and unity beyond it. Absurd and Gnostic pessimism are both double-sided though the Absurdist does not always share the eschatological certainty of the Gnostics.

Finally, Ionesco draws similar conclusions from the experience of human solitude in the cosmos as do the Gnostics: dread becomes a source of human solidarity and fellowship. Men share the condition of alienation and also the origin of their essential being in the divinity. Furthermore, the precise nature of Gnostic fellowship is particularly germane in Ionesco's thinking: it refers solely to human metaphysical status not to socio-economic or political matters. It is our fundamental relationship to the basic conditions of our being which unify all men in all times for Ionesco.

Ionesco has inherited some of the features discussed above from the philosophical ambience of the twentieth century and from his wide reading of religious writers. The notion of the One and the Many, for example, is

as much a Neoplatonic idea as Gnostic. It is therefore very difficult to judge the extent of Gnostic influence on Ionesco with any precision. Rosette Lamont calls Voyages chez les morts Ionesco's 'Gnostic Dream Play' though she does not clarify in what sense this is so.⁹³ I see the role of Gnosticism as multiple. In the first place there are some very precise references to Gnostic thought which in some cases seem to amount to no more than name-dropping and have no organic, structural role in the text.⁹⁴ Gnosticism plays a more symbolic role, however, as part of a number of 'mythical' allusions to cultures of the past and to other works of literature and Jungian archetypes. These all symbolise the 'original' reality which Jean seeks. Finally, Gnosticism has influenced the basic structure of the play and its intellectual substance.

The structure of the play is one of a failed gnostic quest for knowledge. Jean passes through various encounters and what seem to be different levels of reality, rather as the gnostic soul passes through different levels of the cosmos. At each stage something he thought was real is revealed as illusory or meaningless. When Jean tells his father that he has realised that his earthly work is worthless, "de la paille pourrie", his father explains this in gnostic terms: "Ne t'en fais pas, personne n'a réussi à ne rien faire, le monde n'est à personne, le monde est à Satan, si Dieu ne le lui arrache de ses mains" (TH VII 31).

The background to Jean's quest can also be seen in terms of the Gnostic universe. There are references to imprisonment, to life as a cage.⁹⁵ Jean describes how he spent much time ill-at-ease in life because he was ignorant of his being and his destiny. "Pendant près d'un siècle, je ne savais pas d'où j'arrivais. Je ne savais pas où j'allais, je ne savais pas où j'étais." But then for a while he lost this sense of being alien and, like the gnostic soul, was lured into earthly life. "Et puis, l'inhabituel étant devenu habituel et l'anormalité étant devenue la norme,

je me suis dit que j'étais peut-être chez moi tout de même" (TH VII 60).

He mistook the world for the only reality until he experienced an awakening which he describes in a manner reminiscent of the Absurd crisis:

... je prenais bien le rêve pour du réel, j'étais pris dans l'engrenage des choses. J'avais un métier que je prenais pour une vocation. Je fonctionnais, pour oublier ma peur. Mais oui, c'est que je me suis senti chez moi à partir d'un certain moment, il y avait des formes, il y avait des objets dans l'espace, puis tout d'un coup les objets prirent des formes monstrueuses, pour me rappeler sans doute que je n'étais pas chez moi. Où étais-je donc? La chaise était un dragon à deux têtes et l'armoire quelque chose qui ressemblait à un lac (TH VII 60).

Jean is speaking here in another dimension, looking back at a former 'life' now perceived as illusion. This suggests that he has followed the path of a gnostic soul and is moving up through the concentric spheres of the cosmos. In comparison with what he experienced "là-bas", he now feels himself to be in an authentic reality but has an awareness that this may not be "le tout à fait vrai": "Là-bas, les présences ne semblaient que des apparences. Je me sens nettement mieux ici. Dans la vérité. Mais est-ce que c'est vraiment vrai?" (TH VII 61). He is indeed told that he is only nearing the truth, "ce n'est que l'antichambre du vrai".

The room and house imagery runs through the entire play and is present in the reminiscences and dialogues as well as in the stage set itself. Jean has passed through many different rooms and houses and has often 'changed beds'. This expresses his state of dispersal and multiplicity. "Pour le moment je suis riche, pour le moment je suis très riche, je n'ai que cette maison-là, j'habite plusieurs maisons, dans chaque maison j'ai plusieurs lits, je change de lit toutes les nuits" (TH VII 44). Later in the play this restlessness is associated with Jean's search for his origins and his mother. His friend says of the house they are standing in "c'est celle-ci la plus vraie, puisque c'est la maison où tu as vécu avec ta mère" (TH VII 118).

This suggests the double nature of Jean's search for his mother and

his origins but also for a way out of imprisonment. The two are of course linked to a certain extent. Jean has a memory of a place of light (which is how the Gnostics also referred to the Divinity), a place associated with his essential being. "Quel est le nom de la cité avec ses maisons blanches et son ciel? [...] Aluminia, ville de mon coeur, Aluminia, ville de mon rêve, Aluminia, ville de ma vraie réalité. [...] Hélas, tout s'obscurcit. Je n'ai plus assez de force pour garder en moi la lumière d'Aluminia" (TH VII 99). His alienation from an authentic reality is also symbolised in the fact that Jean can no longer read certain languages and signs. At one point he is offered religious books but "Pour moi, ils sont à peu près incompréhensibles. Avant je les comprenais, j'ai oublié, je me suis séparé de la religion." (TH VII 88) He also comes across tarot cards which he can no longer interpret and books "où il est écrit ce qu'il faut faire quand on va mourir ou bien quand on vient de mourir" (TH VII 44).⁹⁶ However he is unsure whether this ancient wisdom is still true or not.

Opposing the gnostic cosmic structure of layers of space is the universe described by Violette which lacks any transcendence or beyond. "Il n'y a pas d'autres espaces, il n'y a pas d'autres lieux, il n'y a pas d'autres temps" (TH VII 103). Jean's problem is partly that he cannot detach himself from the struggles and dilemmas of his earthly life – the wrong done to his mother by his father and his desire for artistic recognition. As he says to his friend Alexandre during a discussion of the possibility of changing oneself "Je ne sais pas si j'aime l'aventure ou si j'ai horreur de l'aventure" (TH VII 111).

The ambiguity of Jean's stance reveals itself in the juxtaposition of the philosophical and the banal, the personal and the mythical. At times there is a quality of self-consciousness and jokiness in the writing. One conversation between Madame Simpson and Arlette ("la femme de Jean et peut-être parfois sa soeur") consists of speculations about the nature of

God and the universe. As Cotrone does in I giganti della montagna, Arlette suggests that the ignorance of animals before such questions is to be envied. However, this rather abstract exchange degenerates and suddenly comes back to earth when the two begin to wrangle and insult each other over the matter of the money to be inherited from Jean's father. As Arlette says, "Vous parliez des grands problèmes de la vie, du monde et du ciel pour en arriver à une mesquine histoire d'héritage" (TH VII 69). Much of the play repeats this pattern, culminating in the scene of vengeance when the Grandmother punishes the Step-mother, Madame Simpson. The friend in this scene puts the gnostic view of the value of actions on earth:

Tout ce que l'on fait sur terre n'a aucune valeur, aucune importance, les plus grands crimes et les plus grands bienfaits sont les raisons des vivants, mais tout cela est nul, tout cela est nul, autant pour l'autre monde que pour le monde de l'autre monde (TH VII 122).

But the avenging Grandmother proclaims victory for the Demiurge, asserting the reality of guilt and therefore also the reality of human action during earthly existence.⁹⁷ Again then we find the transcendental and material views in tension.

This doubleness in the play is anticipated in an important speech early on. The 'densest' writing in the play with its plethora of allusions, it is also a microcosm of the play as a whole. Having seen his life's work reduced to "des poignées de poussière", Jean declares:

Tout est à remettre en question. Tout à reprendre. Mais je continuerai à défendre l'Occident, la vénérabilité du cosmos grec, la liberté que nous confèrent les planètes, l'existentialisme et le gnosticisme, le droit d'inférer, la spéculation valentinienne, le chant de la perle. La défense de l'Occident, la défense de l'Occident, la danse de l'existant, la campagne italienne, la marche sur Rome, la défense de l'Occident, l'Occident de la défense, les dents de la défense, la défense de l'Occident, la défense de l'occiput et mon itinéraire politique. Le statut de l'homme, la culture, les cultes orientaux, la défense de l'Occident, la dent de la défense, la fence de la dent (TH VII 50).

Rosette Lamont has analysed this speech in great detail and I shall not

repeat her insights but rather focus on one of the antitheses on which she does not expand. Jean says that he will defend both Eastern and Western cultures, or rationalism and spirituality. It is important to note that gnosticism stood in relation to Greek thought rather as the Copernican revolution stood in relation to the Theocentric views of the Universe. While the Gnostic god was beyond and against the cosmos, for the Greeks the Divine was everywhere and so they 'venerated the cosmos' and found beauty and order in it. As Jonas puts it, "Greek thought had been a grand expression of man's belonging to the world..."; "The pantheistic or panlogistic confidence of antiquity is shattered in Gnosticism."⁹⁸ While the Greeks exalted reason, the Gnostics awaited illumination then speculated on the basis of what had been revealed to them. But the speech mocks this noble desire to unite^e opposites as the words become jumbled and degenerate into nonsense. Ionesco seems to be harbouring doubts about his grand enterprise even as he attempts it. This element of self-mockery emerges more strongly in the final long monologue after the trial. "À quoi se prête cette ironie?" Jean asks (TH VII 132). Even after finding his mother and avenging her suffering, Jean has not found knowledge or wholeness. The monologue is fragmented and sporadically nonsensical after the fashion of Jacques ou la soumission. Several times Jean asks "est-ce qu'il y a un pont?" using the Ionescan image of access to the transcendent. He reflects on language even as it becomes nonsense. "J'avais pourtant bien souvent, oh bien souvent respecté les catégories que je m'étais infligées, que je m'étais implantées dans le cerveau..." (TH VII 133) He makes bold statements and then admits that his head is "rongée par les mites de l'ignorance". The whole speech becomes an image of the Gnostic view of earthly existence as chaos, multiplicity and anguished questioning. As Jean's mind flits from one dead-end argument to another, there is one brief, almost luminous perception or memory. "Il y avait dans un endroit caché parmi les

buissons un lavoir au bord de l'eau. Les laveuses y battaient le lin blanc." (TH VII 133) One is reminded of Krapp's one sweet memory of a boatride with a girl which returns to his mind in the midst of loss and failure. Here there is the merest glimmer of something positive before Jean reaches the conclusion that he is as ignorant and as trapped as ever. "Je ne sais pas. Je sais seulement que j'ai gardé sur moi les bribes et les miettes des cellules. Je ne sais pas." (TH VII 134).

NOTES

¹ There is a similar outcome in "Canta l'Epistola" where it is not so much Tommaso Unzio's failure to earn a living which ruins him, as his inability to observe the rules of social behaviour which would have him give priority to the feelings of a young lady over the fate of a blade of grass.

² Serafino Gubbio argues that life inevitably seems meaningless when observed from without because it is meant to be 'lived' from within:

"Porsi davanti la vita come un oggetto da studiare, è assurdo, perché la vita, posta davanti così, perde per forza ogni consistenza reale e diventa un'astrazione vuota di senso e di valore. E com'è più possibile spiegarsela? L'avete uccisa. Potete tutt'al più, farne l'anatomia.

La vita non si spiega; si vive.

La ragione è nella vita; non può esserne fuori. E la vita non bisogna porsela davanti, ma sentirsela dentro, e viverla"
(TR 1223).

³ cf. Sartre's, La Nausée where writing is seen as a result of the protagonist's impotence and as a retreat from formlessness and contingency.

⁴ Roberto Alonge, Pirandello tra realismo e mistificazione (Napoli, 1972; rpt: Guida Editori, 1977), p.176.

⁵ Ibid., p.174.

⁶ Compare ECB 17 and Voyages chez les morts (TH VII 60).

⁷ Cf. NCN 220.

⁸ TR 725-6 and MN I 173.

⁹ Such fantasies seem to be a hallmark of obsessive or obsessed personalities: Pirandello's Jacob Shwarb in "Una sfida" who "non pensava nulla di male. Solo, forse, di far saltare tutto il mondo con la dinamite" (NA II 881) and supremely Svevo's Zeno: "Forse traverso una catastrofe inaudita prodotta dagli ordigni ritorneremo alla salute.... Ci sarà un'esplosione enorme che nessuno udrà e la terra ritornata alla forma di nebulosa errerà nei cieli priva di parassiti e di malattie." La coscienza di Zeno (Milano: I Corvi dall'oglio, 1938, rpt: 1981), p.480.

¹⁰ TR 1184. The unhappy Cavalea is also a star-gazer.

¹¹ Quoted by Claudio Vicentini in L'Estetica di Pirandello (Milano: Mursia, 1970), p.21.

¹² TR 1287. Moscarda makes a friend in the street scrutinise his nose "come se quel difetto del mio naso fosse un irreparabile guasto sopravvenuto al congegno dell'universo." - this is precisely what it turns out to be.

13 Giovanni Croci, Introd., Uno, nessuno e centomila, by Pirandello (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 1979), p.xxvii.

14 Pirandello may have discovered this device in the work of Dostoyevsky.

15 A number of Pirandello's novelle show figures such as lawyers or scientists losing their positivist confidence following an encounter with the 'Beyond' - "La carriola", "La casa del Granella", "Dal naso al cielo". The lawyer of "La patente" compensates for the time spent amongst yellowing papers and dusty tomes by passing his nights star-gazing. In his article "Pirandello e l'oltre", Paolo Puppa plots the development of the lawyer figure through Pirandello's work showing how it reflects the passage from positivism to metaphysics. The hyperarticulateness of early lawyer figures turns to silence and wonder. See Pirandello e la cultura del suo tempo, a cura di Stefano Milioto e Enzo Scrivano (Milano: Mursia, 1984), pp.63-86.

16 Ionesco too flirts with this idea: "Ne nous laissons pas aller, ne nous laissons pas entraîner par les courants des opinions, des idéologies, des passions et fanatismes de l'histoire. Mais laissons-nous porter par les vagues du chaos. Laissons-nous aller sur cet océan démonté, dans la réalité" (PPPP 67-8).

17 The very effort of the human mind to evade its own functions and categories perpetuates its activities and results in it spiralling in on itself like a dog chasing its own tail. Ionesco expresses this dilemma succinctly, "Ne pas avoir un système, c'est encore en avoir un" (PPPP 68).

18 Quoted by Melvyn Matthews in "Who told you that you were naked?"

19 The Bhagavad Gita, 18:20, trans. Juan Mascarò (1962, rpt: Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.116. The next two verses are also illuminating in the context of this thesis:

"But if one merely sees the diversity of things, with their divisions and limitations, then one has impure knowledge.

And if one selfishly sees a thing as if it were everything, independent of the ONE and the many, then one is in the darkness of ignorance."

20 The two types of mysticism seek to compensate for the positivist or realist view which assumes that there is only one way of seeing things and only one reality (i.e. the notion of objective reality). Terry Eagleton has explained how this view held a middle ground between two extreme perspectives. He is referring to the turn of the 18th century but, as he himself says, the situation has a parallel in modern materialism:

Objects in a society which could see them as no more than commodities appeared lifeless and inert, divorced from the human subjects who produced or used them. The concrete and the universal seemed to have drifted apart: an aridly rationalist philosophy ignored the sensuous qualities of particular things, while a short-sighted empiricism (the 'official' philosophy of the English middle class, then as now) was unable to peer beyond particular bits and pieces of the world to any total picture which they might

compose." [Literary Theory: an Introduction (Blackwell, 1983), pp.21-3 - my underlining.]

21 In the general context of reactions to the 'Copernican crisis' of this century, it is useful to read George Orwell's essay of 1940, "Inside the Whale", in which he plots the reactions of English writers. He uses the metaphor of the telescope to describe the stance of the 1910-30 generation: "... even the best writers of the time can be convicted of a too Olympian attitude, a too great readiness to wash their hands of the immediate practical problem. They see life very comprehensively, much more so than those who come before or after them, but they see it through the wrong end of the telescope." [Inside the Whale and other essays (1957, rpt: Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p.29].

22 Also PPPP 245: "Vivre hors de la contemplation, dans l'action, dans l'espoir c'est la stupidité, l'aveuglement."

23 See also "Dal naso al cielo"; "La patente" in which il giudice D'Andrea spends his sleepless nights watching the stars, "e vi avviava l'anima a passeggiare come un ragnetto smarrito" (NA I 512). Insect imagery plays an important role in the patterns of images in La Nausée. Such imagery would seem to express dehumanisation of two kinds: man's loss of individuality against the background of all men and his loss of spirituality with the result that he is seen as just another form of physical existence, and one which is essentially no different from animal and plant life. The raging ego that is the narrator of Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground is concerned in his account to tell us "why I couldn't even make an insect of myself". See Ionesco's Le Solitaire p.26 and Le Piéton de l'air, TH III 180.

24 He refers to the liberating effect of financial security later: "le bain quotidien, la petite prison à l'intérieur de la grande, cette prison-là m'avait ouvert sa porte." (p.31) George Orwell is again enlightening here. Asking why the leading writers of the 1920s were mostly pessimistic, he wonders, "Was it not after all, because these people were writing in an exceptionally comfortable epoch? It is just in such times that 'cosmic despair' can flourish. People with empty bellies never despair of the universe, nor even think about the universe." (Inside the Whale, pp.28-9). This would seem to apply also to the well-heeled but anguished heroes of the early 19th century - Goethe's "Werther", De Musset's Octave in La Confession d'un enfant du siècle, Chateaubriand's René, and Foscolo's Jacopo Ortis.

25 In an interview in the Messaggero della Domenica in 1919 Pirandello said "In questo romanzo c'è la sintesi completa di tutto ciò che ho fatto e la sorgente di quello che farò". Quoted by Marziano Guglielminetti, "Le vicende e i significativi di Uno, nessuno e centomila" in Il Romanzo di Pirandello, comp. Enzo Lauletta (Palermo: Palumbo, 1976), p.195.

26 LS 91. On p.188 he uses the same image as Sylvia Plath to express his depression: "L'impression d'être dans une sorte de cage en verre".

27 See for example pages 78, 117 and 144.

28 See also p.72 and p.91.

29 See also p.204: "Qu'est-ce qui m'a manqué? J'aurais voulu tout savoir."

30 For the 'chinese box' image see pp.55-6: "La terre est un globe à l'intérieur d'un autre globe qui se trouve vraisemblablement à l'intérieur d'un autre globe qui lui-même se trouve à l'intérieur d'un autre globe qui..." Also p.58. This is a recurring image in Ionesco's writing and can be seen to be an expression of his fear that the universe lacks any solid and certain 'origins' behind the many veils of illusion.

31 See also p.90 and p.42.

32 This too is an impulse which seems to be germane to Absurdist writers. Mr. Rooney in Beckett's All that fall says to his wife, "Did you ever wish to kill a child? (pause) Nip some young doom in the bud." (1957, rpt: London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p.31.

33 For example: "C'est inconcevable de ne pas pouvoir concevoir l'inconcevable." (p.75) Ionesco is very fond of this genre of word play - see also p.143, p.126 and p.105. There are a number of other comic effects too: irony (p.166), self-mockery (p.163) and self-referentiality: "On a cultivé le désespoir, on en a fait de la littérature, des oeuvres d'art" (p.113).

34 Having listened to a detailed account of his "angoisse", the philosopher tells the hermit "tout cela est bien banal, ... tout cela est très connu." (p.113)

35 The comparison is significant because Ionesco frequently concretises his inner world in the form of rooms. This is most obvious in Voyages chez les morts.

36 See also pp.37-8.

37 LS 47. Cf. Pindar's: "Things of a day! What are we, and what are we not? A dream about a shadow is man: yet, when some god-given splendour falls, a glory of light comes over him and his life is sweet." Quoted by Mascaro, Introd., The Bhagavad Gita, p.31.

38 See LS p.40, pp.94-5, p.112.

39 LS 16: "Dans les espaces gris de l'intérieur, il n'y a que des décombres, sous d'autres décombres, sous d'autres décombres. Mais s'il y a des décombres, il y a eu peut-être un temple autrefois, des colonnes lumineuses, un autel ardent?"

40 See Mircea Eliade, Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Harvill Press, 1961), p.44. In addition to symbolising the centre of the world and the support of the universe, the tree can symbolise a variety of associated concepts. It may be related to the Great Goddess and symbolise life in its perpetual fertility or absolute reality. It can also refer to rebirth, to Spring, and symbolise the yearly resurrection of plant life. See Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, trans. R. Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), pp.265-294.

41 Images and Symbols, p.45. The most obvious example comes from the Taittiriya Samhita (VI 6, 4, 2): "In truth, the sacrificer makes himself a ladder and a bridge to reach the celestial world" (Eliade, p.45). Ionesco may have found the image in the Book of the Dead: "The ladder is set up that I may see the gods" (Eliade, p.50).

42 Ibid., p.48. Pirandello's novella "Dal naso al cielo" uses the spider web to express ascent into the unknown.

43 Ibid., p.50.

44 Ibid., p.51.

45 Ibid., p.49.

46 Ibid., p.15.

47 For example the Monsieur of Scene VII reiterates the hermit's sentiments about newspapers, the 'chinese box' universe and man's 'constructing' activities.

48 See MN II 935 for Donata's failure to let go:

Elj: .. avanti! bisogna nuotare, nuotare!

Donata: Ma vedi che non ho saputo? Mi sono aggrappato a te, con gli occhi chiusi...

49 MN II 921: "Mi voglio conservare gli occhi nuovi, io, ha capito? E sto con la natura. Mi guardo da ogni intimità, come dalla peste.... Vivere in società? domandare perché uno ha detto o fatto una tal cosa? È da crepare. Io voglio restare estraneo: estraneo."

50 MN II 928: "quando sono solo, sul mare, in campagna coi miei colori, insomma all'aperto - anche se ho contrarietà o c'è rischi da affrontare - non mi perdo, ci vado incontro, e sono lieto."

51 Jean-Michel Gardair says that the play "repose sur un conflit intérieur qui ne saurait être figuré (d'où la pertinence du 'discours indirect' auquel est confié l'essentiel de la pièce),..." Pirandello: fantasmes et logiques du double (Paris: Larousse, 1972), p.102.

52 Corrado Simoni in his introduction to the Oscar Mondadori paperback edition (Milano: 1970) says "nasce il vecchio contrasto pirandelliano fra la mutevole spontaneità e la fissità tragica delle consuetudini (forma e vita)." (p.xxxii). I would argue that Pirandello has created variations on the old theme.

53 See also Donata's long speech on p.943. Similar sentiments are expressed in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore (MN I 72), Diana e la Tuda (MN I 422) and "Candelora" (NA II 602).

54 She says of him "Lui è così, per aria, sparpagliato, tutto dietro alle cose..." (MN II 939).

55 Donata finds in the theatre partly what Sartre's Roquentin finds in fiction or a recorded song: a kind of inevitability and therefore a retreat from the uncertainties of the contingent, real world.

56 "Ma - in tanti modi - caro, è come sono stata finora! - E tu dici che non puoi soffrire il teatro? È strano!" (MN II 933).

57 The mystical language continues: "conquistavo in quell'improvviso superamento d'ogni angustia, in quell'accensione di tutta l'anima,..."

58 Although Enrico advises his servants that "dovevate sapervelo fare per voi stessi, l'inganno", he later admits that he can no longer keep up his own pretence (MN I 355).

59 It is interesting that Donata uses the same word as Elj used earlier - "fantasma" - but with an entirely different value attached. Of Donata's performance Elj had said "A me è parsa un tremulo fantasma..." (MN II 958).

60 Robert W. Corrigan, "The theatre of Ionesco: The Ghost and Primal Dialogue" in The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theatrical Quest, ed. M. Lazar (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1982), p.51.

61 Quoted by Lucia Massi in "Pirandello's Theory of 'Modern Myths'", The Yearbook of the British Pirandello Society 6 (1986), p.9. The first quotation is from an interview given to Mario Corsi and published in the Gazzetta del Popolo on 11th June 1929. The second is from an interview given to Enrico Bottazzi and published in the Corriere della sera on 13th October 1928.

62 The Mountain Giants and other plays, trans. Marta Abba (New York: Crown, 1958), pp.23-4.

63 Tim Fitzpatrick, "Does Ilse die at the end of I Giganti della montagna?" in Altro Polo, ed. N. Newbiggin and S. Trambaiolo (University of Sydney, 1978), pp.125-142. John B. Rey, "Pirandello's 'Last' Play: Some Notes on the Mountain Giants", Modern Drama, 20, No.4 (1977), pp.413-420.

64 Giorgio Strehler, "The Giants of the Mountain", World Theatre, 16, No.3 (1967), pp.263-269.

65 Luigi Pirandello, "Introduzione al teatro italiano", in Storia del Teatro Italiano, ed. Silvio D'Amico (Milano: Garzanti, 1953), vol.4.

66 See MN II 1371: "C'è mi disse sorridendo 'un olivo saraceno, grande, in mezzo alla scena: con cui ho risolto tutto'."

67 Arcangelo Leone De Castris, Storia di Pirandello, p.196.

68 Ionesco's predilection for spatial imagery is evident also in his journals. Referring to Rodica's devotion to him he says "Moi-même je suis son domaine, je suis moi-même comme une maison dont elle est l'habitant.... Je suis sa demeure" (JM 137-8).

69 Montaigne, Essais, Tome II (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1962), pp.33-4. The malady is also known as "bovarysme" after Flaubert's thirsting heroine.

70 See TH III 155:

Marthe: Moi, j'aime toujours.

Béranger: Qu'est-ce que tu aimes?

Marthe: J'aime ... Je ne sais pas quoi... Mais j'aime. C'est tellement beau ce que l'on voit.

71 The figure of Schaëffer would seem to be based on a figure in three dreams which Ionesco recounts in JM 191-8. The Schaëffer of the play resembles the Schäffer of the first dream most closely.

72 The final line echoes Artaud's vision of the "théâtre de la cruauté" where the spectator will be reminded "Nous ne sommes pas libres. Et le ciel peut encore nous tomber sur la tête" [Antonin Artaud, Le théâtre et son double (Gallimard, nrf. 1964), p.123.

73 Ronald Hayman, Eugène Ionesco (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972), p.104.

74 Richard Coe, Ionesco: A study of his Plays, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (London: Methuen, 1971), p.128.

75 Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters, trans. Olga Marx (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), p.2.

76 Ibid., pp.2-3.

77 Ibid., p.3.

78 Ibid., pp.4-5.

79 For an account of the original dream, see JM 172-3.

80 The "fille aux cheveux roux avec des taches de rousseur" recalls Proust's Gilberte Swann, while Mme. Goupillon is an echo of his Madame Goupil.

81 The subtitle of the play is "Thèmes et variations".

82 In an interview reprinted in HQ (p.14) and originally given in July 1978, Ionesco refers to his recent reading of En quête de la gnose by Henri-Charles Puech. But his knowledge of Gnosticism may predate this, as he refers to it in Le Solitaire (1973) where the philosopher recommends reading the Gnostics as a cure for the hermit's depression (p.113). Puech's book must certainly have struck Ionesco in its emphasis on the search for the self. This emphasis would seem to be quite deliberate on the part of Puech as his epigraphs all single out this aspect of the phenomenon. For example: "Me chercher moi-même et connaître qui j'étais et qui je suis afin de redevenir ce que j'étais." My information on Gnosticism comes from:

Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion (1958, 2nd ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

R. McL. Wilson, The Gnostic Problem (London: Mowbray, 1958).

Henri-Charles Puech, En quête de la gnose, 2 vols. (Gallimard nrf, 1978).

Robert Grant, ed. Gnosticism, An Anthology (London: Collins, 1961).

Jonas' study concludes with a substantial epilogue on the modern aspects of Gnosticism, "Gnosticism, nihilism and Existentialism".

83 Jonas, p.60.

84 "O thou beyond all things
what else can it be meet to call thee?
How can speech praise thee?
for thou art not expressible by any speech.

....

End of all things art thou
and one and all and none,
Not being one nor all, claiming all names
how shall I call thee?

Opening lines of a hymn by Gregorius the Theologian. Jonas, p.289.

85 Ibid., p.288.

86 Ibid., p.56.

87 Ibid., p.63.

88 "He who thus possesses knowledge... (is like) a person who having been intoxicated, becomes sober and having come to himself reaffirms that which is essentially his own". Ibid., p.71.

89 Ibid., p.56.

90 Ibid., p.60.

91 Ibid., p.45.

92 "Joy to the man who has rediscovered himself and awakened." Ibid., p.89.

93 Rosette Lamont, "Journey to the Kingdom of the Dead: Ionesco's Gnostic Dream Play" in The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theatrical Quest, pp.93-119.

94 For example TH VII 117: "On s'y est souvent rencontrés, dans les rêves je te rencontre bien plus souvent que dans cette fausse réalité, c'est de là que nous parlâmes de l'un et du multiple."

95 TH VII 112 and 134.

96 See also pp.35 and 93 for 'echoes'.

97 "Je ne vois pas l'innocence, et le D miurge est en train de rire en ce moment de ce jugement et ce jugement je le donne pour qu'Il rie davantage. Bouffons que nous sommes. Je te condamne" (TH VII 124).

98 Jonas, pp.251 and 264.

CHAPTER 6

DOUBLE PERSPECTIVES: THE AESTHETICS OF MYSTICISM

Can a thinking man have any self-respect whatever?
Dostoyevsky: Notes from Underground

It may be that the faith of the future will be a religion of irony
David Worcester: The Art of Satire

The failure of the visionary quest in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco creates a stalemate between consciousness as a permanent obstacle to vision and as the only available human means of breaking down that obstacle. This produces a number of overlapping but distinct aesthetic features to be dealt with in this chapter. Some of their most characteristic modes of writing possess a double structure of one kind or another: irony, "umorismo", tragi-comedy, transcendental farce, "farce tragique", the fantastic and the grotesque. Some of Ionesco's subtitles alone testify to the element of self-conscious parody which runs through his work: "anti-pièce", "pseudo-drame".¹ A brief examination of the structure of these double-sided modes of writing will lead into some examples which show how the modes work simultaneously to disorientate the reader or spectator and thereby replicate the expanded consciousness of the mystic.

I Humour

The double perspective in question is far more radical than the mere perception of conflicting or multiple realities. It is a doubleness built on man's essential duality of body and mind; it is really a doubling of experience. Despite its awareness of the emptiness and constructed nature of the "Symbolic order", the mind cannot detach itself entirely from it

because all the processes of consciousness are directed by that culturally acquired mode of perception. The subject is somehow both inside and outside that "order", experiencing two different orders of reality.

The importance of this distinction can be conveniently illustrated with the example which Pirandello describes to explain what he means by "umorismo".² The "avvertimento del contrario", which is the structure of the comic as Pirandello sees it, is based on the juxtaposition of a given image (a grotesquely made-up old lady) with another, culturally-received, image (how an old lady 'normally' behaves and looks). There is already a doubleness here, the doubleness of incongruity. Pirandello's notion of "umorismo" in effect adds another layer of doubleness to that of the comic: the observer brings reflection to bear on the comic image and in so doing adds emotion (empathy). There results a conflict of emotions - hilarity and pity - which may in turn lead to reflection on another kind of duality, that of appearance and reality, the mask and the face. Of paramount importance is the simultaneity of the "avvertimento" and the "sentimento" and the absence of any resolution of their conflict. Like the person who has experienced the Absurd, the humorist is both involved in and detached from the reality he observes. In playing like this on the doubleness of the world and of man, "umorismo" represents a celebration of multiplicity and paradox.

Like the Absurd or visionary moments, "umorismo" involves a "decentering" whereby one reality is shown up as a narrow pretence. If Pirandello's first example talks of exposing the tragic behind the comic, a later one juxtaposes the dignified man-made image of regal pomp and splendour with the naked man underneath the ermine mantle.³

The sensibility and artistic processes which point out the rumbling of a corpse's stomach at a solemn moment in a funeral ceremony are likewise of a double nature. Pirandello conceives his humorist as someone with a

bitter experience of life, who is at odds with it and cannot abandon himself to his feelings for fear they will turn out to be illusions:

Nella sua anormalità, non può esser che amaramente comica la condizione d'un uomo che si trova ad esser sempre quasi fuori di chiave, ad essere a un tempo violino e contrabbasso; d'un uomo a cui un pensiero non può nascere, che subito non gliene nasca un altro opposto, contrario; a cui per una ragione ch'egli abbia di dir sì, subito un'altra e due e tre non ne sorgono che lo costringono a dir no; e tra il sì e il no lo tengan sospeso, perplesso, per tutta la vita; d'un uomo che non può abbandonarsi a un sentimento, senza avvertire subito qualcosa dentro che gli fa una smorfia e lo turba e lo sconcerta e lo indispettisce (SPSV 138).

The doubleness of the creation of a 'humoristic' work lies, as in the reaction to the work, in a fusion of two distinct mental activities. In the 'ordinary' work of art, Pirandello says, the artist submits to the images produced by his mind and places analysis or reflection at the service of those images: "la riflessione si nasconde, resta, per così dire, invisibile: è, quasi, per l'artista una forma del sentimento" (SPSV 126). But in the case of the humorist, reflection dismantles ("scompone") the images as they are produced and "suscita un'associazione per contrarii" (SPSV 133). Pirandello concludes "l'umorismo potrebbe dirsi un fenomeno di sdoppiamento nell'atto della concezione" (SPSV 134).

The links between the Absurd or visionary experience and "umorismo" are made clearer when Pirandello describes the metaphysical aspect of the humorist's understanding. Even though comic incongruity is an essential part of "umorismo", the humorist is not in the business of mocking human illusions, because he understands that such illusions are our only defence against the void or "una realtà vivente oltre la vista umana, fuori delle forme dell'umana ragione", a reality, Pirandello adds, "a cui l'uomo non può affacciarsi se non a costo di morire o d'impazzire" (SPSV 152-3). The humorist's awareness of the implications of dismantling illusions and proud images results not in mockery but compassion:

... attraverso il ridicolo di questa scoperta vedrà il lato serio

e doloroso; smonterà questa costruzione, ma non per riderne solamente; e in luogo di sdegnarsene, magari, ridendo, compatirà. (SPSV 146).

But then why does the humorist dismantle constructions in the first place? In the case of the grotesque old lady, the humorist is essentially revealing that reality is more complex than our perception and our constructions would have us think. Towards the end of his essay, contrasting the abstract, logical and ordered nature of the 'ordinary' work of art with the fragmented and disjointed nature of the humoristic work, Pirandello sees "umorismo" as correcting an inadequate and simplified view of reality.⁴ If the truth is disturbing in its complexity and fluidity and in the doubt it consequently casts on the efficacy of human consciousness, Pirandello's essay also hints that such revelations may contain good news and bring a sense of liberation because their corollary is that the mystery of life and death may simply be a projection of the mind, "un inganno della nostra mente" (SPSV 155).

While Pirandello emphasises that "umorismo" is the result of an entire sensibility, what he does not examine explicitly is the extent to which he is also dealing with the merging of two dramatic genres, comedy and tragedy. This is a theme which many later critics and dramatists have recognised as a defining characteristic of modern drama.⁵ George Brandt in an essay on twentieth century comedy emphasises the weakening of "felt" class divisions as a central factor in the blurring of genre distinctions.⁶ Of great importance too, I believe, is the extent to which the people of the twentieth century are caught between two conflicting images of themselves. It is a conflict which Pirandello brings out at the end of L'umorismo using the telescope as a humoristic emblem.⁷ Science may have revealed man's infinite smallness but the achievements of science suggest his greatness, an irony which has become refined now that man has so excelled himself in science that he is in a position to annihilate the entire planet. As

Ionesco says, "des inventions, faites pour améliorer les conditions de l'existence humaine, menacent non pas la paix du monde, ni les libertés qui existent encore dans notre univers, mais notre existence elle-même" (LQI 87-8).

Ionesco points to a clash of perspectives as central to the tone of modern writing. "Pour l'esprit critique moderne, rien ne peut être pris tout à fait au sérieux, rien tout à fait à la légère" (NCN 61). George Brandt notes that the target of modern comedy is no longer the deviant individual but the social framework.⁸ Pirandello and Ionesco take this further: the target is life or consciousness itself. Like Pirandello, Ionesco traces dramatic conflicts back to their roots in the very make-up of the human condition. "Éviter la psychologie ou plutôt lui donner une dimension métaphysique" (NCN 60). Drama is no longer concerned with particular values but with the problem of meaning and values per se. If genre distinctions were partly a matter of the type of people portrayed, Ionesco's writings on the theatre put forward the idea that the mixing of genres arises out of writing the different levels of the dramatic text (by which I mean the entire range of expressive elements in a play, from the dialogue to the set) in different modes. Serious themes may be treated farcically. "Sur un texte burlesque, un jeu dramatique. Sur un texte dramatique, un jeu burlesque" (NCN 256). In Les Chaises the poignant theme of an individual's life adding up to something, of the desire for a message to communicate to one's fellow is presented through the visual joke of the empty chairs, the childish behaviour of the Old man, the erotic display of the Old woman and various unclassifiable jokes such as an imitation of February consisting in scratching the head like Stan Laurel. As Ionesco expresses it in his programme note, "Des êtres noyés dans l'absence de sens ne peuvent être que grotesques, leur souffrance ne peut être que dérisoirement tragique" (NCN 261). But Ionesco has also correctly seen that the

modern view of the human condition is of a recognisable aesthetic structure in its own right quite independent of what any writer might like to make of it. The Absurd condition is an instance of comic incongruity but on a cosmic scale not in the realm of social manners. "Le comique étant intuition de l'absurde, il me semble plus désespérant que le tragique" (NCN 61).

The clash of perspectives is more than the natural outcome of the new view of man. It is one of a whole range of devices designed to estrange the spectator from his habitual world and to renew his perception. As in the visionary moment, fragmentation is a prelude to unity: "il faut réaliser une sorte de dislocation du réel, qui doit précéder sa réintégration" (NCN 60). Like Pirandello, Ionesco conceives of Art as a means of recuperating realities which habit and language necessarily exclude. "L'art pour moi consiste en la révélation de certaines choses que la raison, la mentalité quotidienne me cachent. L'art perce ce quotidien" (NCN 188). Whereas Pirandello contrasts the 'ordinary' writer and the humorist, Ionesco refers to an identical antithesis between what he terms the 'realist' and the avant-garde writers, terms which he uses in an a-historical sense.⁹ He identifies realism with political commitment in that to be committed to one point of view implies leaving out other realities, just as the realist leaves out aspects of reality which disturb or contradict him. The "esprit bourgeois" is "antifantaisiste, 'réaliste' dans une conception systématique, partielle d'une réalité fausse, mécanisée."¹⁰ Just as the humorist for Pirandello brings in the opposite view and undermines the initial, superficial view, so Ionesco's avant-garde artist is a constant questioner of whatever is taken for reality in his time. "L'homme d'avant-garde est l'opposant vis-à-vis du système existant. Il est un critique de ce qui est..." (NCN 77-8).

The Pirandellian humorist sees life 'naked', without the embellishments of forms and illusions. For Ionesco the artist must aim to 'strip'

language of the encrustations of ideology and habit in order to return it to a pure state in which it can express "des réalités neuves et anciennes, présentes et inactuelles.." (NCN 223) and "rendre l'incommunicable de nouveau communicable" (NCN 188). For Ionesco the artist is able to by-pass the Symbolic order and gaze on reality directly without the mediation of language and concepts; the artist himself is a mystic.¹¹

Both Pirandello and Ionesco conceive of their work as "undressing" reality. Pirandello cites as being humoristic a poem by Giusti in which enemy soldiers are seen, metaphorically speaking, without their uniforms; in other words as young men a long way from home in a country that does not want them. The poet's loathing for them as enemies is transmuted into compassion for them as fellow human beings. It is an example which would appeal greatly to Ionesco who claims in his plays that "je déshabille l'homme de l'inhumanité de sa classe, de sa race, de sa condition bourgeoise ou autre;..." (JM 24) and that he shows human beings in their essential humanity confronting the eternal problems of life and death.¹² But whereas Pirandello juxtaposes the illusions and the 'naked' reality which they hide, Ionesco can be seen as keeping the two images separate to a certain extent. His early parodic works are the 'dismantling' stage of his art. Their characters are lacking in a private inner world. This world comes to the fore in Ionesco's middle and late plays which feature the anti-hero in search of authenticity and a life beyond clichés and routines. Over the entire spread of his work Ionesco presents, as it were, the two sides of Pirandello's humoristic perception. However in some of the quest plays Ionesco returns briefly to parodic dismantling: nonsense and word-play predominate and the characters become puppet-like.¹³ I would suggest that this is related to the failure of the visionary quest: transcendence is impossible and all we have are empty words to play with.

The juxtaposition of two levels of reality is evident also in the

nature of Ionesco's protagonists who are shown to be both ridiculous and sympathetic in their naïve idealism. Ionesco alludes to this doubleness in his theoretical comments. While Pirandello sees himself as fusing two stances, Ionesco thinks that he has a 'pendulum' attitude towards his characters who "partent du comique, sont tragiques à un moment et finissent dans le comique ou le tragi-comique" (NCN 176). I think Ionesco is wrong about his characters here and that he is in fact closer to Pirandello's humoristic stance. Moreover, like Pirandello, he is aware that nothing is purely comic or purely tragic; a tragic dilemma may lie under the comic surfaces. Comedy, as Ionesco says, "c'est une autre face du tragique" (NCN 176).

Ionesco is much closer to Pirandello in the ways in which he distinguishes the humorous from the comic. He too conceives humour as a result of a double stance comprising perception and emotion: "L'humour suppose une conscience lucide. Il suppose un dédoublement, une conscience lucide de la vanité de ses propres passions" (ECB 140). Like Pirandello, Ionesco sees humour as registering certain psychological and philosophical implications of incongruity. He links it explicitly with absurdity and with the paradoxical position of being both involved and detached at once.

L'humour, lui, traduit l'impression qu'a l'humouriste que tout est déraisonnable, dérisoire, que nous sommes tous depuis notre naissance dans une situation inexpliqués et inexplicable.... C'est aussi une dénonciation de l'absurdité, un dépassement du drame.... Bref, l'humour, c'est prendre conscience de l'absurdité tout en continuant à vivre dans l'absurdité:" (ECB 140),

the situation precisely which results from the Absurd or visionary moment. And the dilemma cannot be resolved: the subject can neither return to his pre-Absurd perception nor go beyond Absurdity. "En effet, la démystification totale serait la mort" (ECB 141).

In the writings of both authors the capacity for this kind of reflection inevitably makes of the humorist a self-doubter, and one who is

prepared to change his views. While Pirandello sees humour in terms of its inter-personal effect, compassion, Ionesco deduces the political consequences and claims that "où il n'y a pas d'humour (cette liberté prise, ce détachement vis-à-vis de soi-même) il y a le camp de concentration" (NCN 182). And pursuing the idea that humour recognises the absence of absolutes and therefore tolerates different points of view, he declares "L'humour, c'est la liberté" (NCN 204).

II Irony

So far we have looked at the aesthetic implications of Absurdism and mysticism only through the theory and terminology of the two writers. In conventional critical terms, what is at issue here is really an ironic vision of life. The word 'irony' now has far more applications than it had originally. From being a rhetorical figure or stylistic device operating at the level of the statement and merely embellishing a point, irony has expanded into something like a philosophy of life, or, in literary terms, into a structural principle which can govern a work's creation and imbue its entire form.¹⁴ Even in its original form irony was an elusive phenomenon. The simplicity of Johnson's definition - "A mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words" - masks the problem of analysing precisely how the split between 'word' and 'meaning' functions. I.A. Richards' "the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses", does not bring out the exact nature of the paradox within irony.¹⁵ As in "umorismo", the opposition is not simply a matter of conflicting statements but arises when referential meaning clashes with a meaning produced by other elements of the text. But despite the Pirandellian ring of Richards' definition, this clash does not yield an emotional ambiguity. The evolution of irony is largely a matter of the internalising of the opposition of meanings to the point where the text itself mocks its own attempt to create meaning and its own status as literature.

One of the major changes in the nature of irony lies in the relationship between the ironist and the object of his irony. Traditionally irony relied on the existence of an innocent victim who is unaware of a level of meaning which contradicts his own. There was the implicit assumption that one view was the correct view, in other words, the ironist was essentially committing the same sin as the victim of his irony. Furthermore, in

traditional irony the contradiction is resolved and so makes it quite different from "umorismo" where the unresolvability of the contradiction is of the essence. On this point "umorismo" differs also from satire and the comic, as Pirandello points out in his essay:

... è proprio dell'umorista, per la speciale attività che assume in lui la riflessione, generando il sentimento del contrario, il non saper più da qual parte tenere, la perplessità, lo stato irresoluto della coscienza.

E quest'appunto distingue nettamente l'umorista dal comico, dall'ironico, dal satirico (SPSV 145).

Ionesco's stance with regard to the characters in La Cantatrice chauve is essentially of a traditional ironic nature. D.C. Muecke's description of this brand of ironic vision could equally well apply to Ionesco's play:

What the ironist objectively sees is, to put it in the most basic terms, a soulless slave mechanically performing meaningless acts in a meaningless world while being confidently unaware that he is any thing but a rational self-determining person behaving purposefully in a meaningful world.¹⁶

But the assumptions on which traditional irony was built have been radically overthrown. It is no longer possible to be ironical about someone's viewpoint in a climate where perception of reality itself is seen to be an imposed viewpoint or illusion. Such a view of human perception transmutes the standpoint of the traditional ironist to that of a victim of irony. If there exists an ironist, it is God. There can no longer be individual instances of irony; only a general condition of irony in which the human condition itself is ironic. The Absurdist's discovery that human nature is at odds with the nature of the world in which it must live, his awareness of the human striving for absolutes and certainty in an uncertain, relative and multiple world mean that he is at once the subject and object of General Irony.¹⁷ From this viewpoint Pirandello's "umorismo" can be seen to be General Irony because the source of the incongruity is traced back to metaphysical principles which involve all men. The only source of superiority now lies in the distinction between those who are aware of man's

derisory state and those who are not. But this superiority is necessarily humble because it comprises a recognition that the awareness does not resolve the ironic contradiction. In Pirandello's work it is frequently the most rationalistic characters who themselves undermine the claims of rationalism. Laudisi in Così è (se vi pare) laughs, not because he knows who Signora Ponza is, but because no one knows. As his 'mirror moment' in Act Two scene three shows, he includes himself in the ironic situation. And while Diego Cinci of Ciascuno a suo modo dissociates himself from the mechanical behaviour of the people around him and exults in the irrational moment which shows up the factitiousness of their constructions, he is haunted by death and the randomness of his inner world. Furthermore his authority is challenged by Prestino who accuses him of being empty of feeling and puts forward the claims of compassion.¹⁸

The procedure whereby the apparent spokesman of the author is challenged and seen to be lacking is typical of General Irony. It can be seen in an extreme form in Ionesco's work where his awareness that language alienates him from reality and that any utterance is likely to be hypostatized and transformed into an oppressive absolute results in self-mockery or in the undermining of his own assumption of authority. This is evident in Nicolas d'Eu's taking over the bullying of Choubert in Victimes du devoir and superlatively in L'Impromptu de l'Alma where Ionesco puts himself on stage. Having parodied the writings of his most theoretical critics, the Ionesco double finds himself delivering a lecture on his author's theories in equally absolutist terms. The play not only illustrates thematically the infinite regressiveness of irony, but formally too with its use of the 'mise-en-abîme' pattern of the dream within a dream within a dream. Ionesco's need to undermine his own 'esprit de sérieux' is most obvious in his personal writings where he often comments in parentheses on the ideas just expressed.¹⁹ Each attempt to establish a position is cancelled out by

the recognition that to take up one position is to leave out all the others and not to be in possession of reality in its entirety.

Ionesco verges here on Romantic Irony, a brand of irony with whose theory Pirandello was closely acquainted through his reading of Friedrich Schlegel and other German Romantic writers and philosophers such as Ludwig Tieck, Fichte and Hegel. It is here that the metaphysical possibilities within General Irony are taken to an extreme and impinge on the author's act of expression itself. As Lilian Furst says, Schlegel gave Romantic Irony "a wholly new metaphysical status" and invested it with "an epistemological and ontological function".²⁰

Romantic Irony develops the general irony that man is a producer of constructions in a chaotic world and points out that the work of art itself shares this condition of illusion and is a 'victim' of irony in its own right. It is possible to appreciate Romantic Irony when reading the exquisitely articulate tracts written on the subject of the inadequacy of language. The subject of the writing has implications for the status of the writing itself. However, a work evinces Romantic Irony when it deals ironically with that irony, that is, when the writing registers an awareness of the irony of the act of writing. It must be conscious of itself as a flawed medium.²¹

Romantic Irony is easily misunderstood, perhaps because of the density and abstractness of Schlegel's terminology. It is not sufficient to simply break the dramatic illusion in a play or for a novelist to put himself in his own work. Muecke gives such instances a category of their own, 'Proto-Romantic Irony'.²² D.J. Enright furnishes both a very clear definition of his own and quotes other definitions, amongst which is that of Anne K. Mellor:

She defines the romantic ironist as one "who perceives the universe as an infinitely abundant chaos; who sees his own consciousness as simultaneously limited and involved in a process of

growing or becoming; who therefore enthusiastically engages in the difficult but exhilarating balancing between self-creation and self-destruction; and who then articulates this experience in a form that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself...."23

This describes the nature of Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore very well but is also a good definition of the final position in the visionary quest examined by our two authors. However, ultimately Enright misses the point and trivialises Romantic Irony: "Affirm and deny in one sentence and you too can be a romantic ironist."²⁴ This is to ignore the metaphysical level at which this kind of irony takes place and the way in which it must have some effect on the act of expression and give rise to self-referential work which exposes itself as an edifice of words. Schlegel himself, like Ionesco, used the fragment to embody the flux of assertions, revisions and contradictions of his thought.

One manifestation of Romantic Irony is the work of art which focuses on the processes of artistic production, depicting the artist's struggle with the chaotic stuff of reality and the fixity of language. Gide's Les Faux monnayeurs does this superlatively and he adds another level of transcendence or consciousness by writing his own journal of how he wrote the novel which contains a journal of a novelist who is supposedly writing that novel. Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore similarly makes art out of the impossibility of making art and expresses a conflict of Pirandello's soul with the pretence at not expressing it. He both undermines his former style of writing in his self-mocking reference to his earlier play Il giuoco delle parti and also illuminates the relationship of all art to life and of consciousness to reality. As Muecke says, "The Romantic Ironist... puts himself into his work but simultaneously indicates his detachment from it."²⁵ The ambivalence of art as Pirandello presents it in Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore is typical of Romantic Irony with its "continual dialectic process of ironic affirmations and negations."²⁶ Art is "truer"

than life though less real; it fixes and distorts the flux of life yet offers it its only possible form of immortality. The same ironic dialectic is present in the way Pirandello manipulates the audience's feelings for Enrico IV, juggling with the notions of madness and normality until the distinction hardly matters given the "spaventosa miseria che non è di lui solo, ma di tutti" (MN I 353): the passage of time, the brevity of life, the difficulty of communicating one's reality to another. The process is summarised by Pirandello in L'umorismo: "Ogni sentimento, ogni pensiero, ogni moto che sorga nell'umorista si sdoppia subito nel suo contrario: ogni sí in un no, che viene in fine ad assumere lo stesso valore del sí." (SPSV 139) The implication in Enrico IV that we are all masked means finally that Enrico's superiority or advantage over his fellows is, like that of the mystic, one of the intellect and the imagination. Neither can physically and wholly transcend their condition. This notion of an intellectual or imaginative freedom is a theme in its own right in some of Pirandello's novelle which will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

An aspect of Romantic Irony is also evident in the way Pirandello and Ionesco treat the visionary theme over a number of works. As Charles Glicksberg suggests, "Romantic Irony is an acknowledgement of human limitations".²⁷ It may involve the writer in alternately or simultaneously indulging and criticising his thirst for absolutes in the knowledge of the futility of doing so. Sometimes the visionary theme is treated as a straight, serious theme while other times it is clearly an ironic device and has a literary or aesthetic function. Ionesco half-mocks the nostalgia in Les Chaises, portrays it sympathetically while showing its futility in Tueur sans gages then dramatises its self-centered or dangerous side in La Soif et la faim. Pirandello mocks contemplative transcendence in Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio yet writes a fond and lyrical portrait of it in L'uomo dal fiore in bocca. Now the visionary moment ironises life, the next

moment life ironises the vision. As Muecke puts it, "The infinite regressions and infinite transcendencies ... are perhaps to be connected with the concept of the infinite elusiveness of reality" – the visionary theme par excellence.²⁸ There is a further irony in the fact that one reality is revealed as illusion and yet what is perceived as reality after the visionary moment is unliveable and out of reach.

There are, I believe, a number of further manifestations of Romantic Irony in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco which break the dialectic by using language in new ways. In a culture where language is now seen to stand between consciousness and reality rather than uniting them, a way out of the irony of continuing to use language is to forget its referential function and use it as pure form. Ionesco's notion of the writer as a constant destroyer of what is real and his fear of taking up a fixed stance with regard to anything sometimes lead him to theorise in a manner which recalls Flaubert's desire to write "un livre sur rien". Of La Cantatrice chauve he wrote "Essai d'un théâtre abstrait ou non figuratif.... Théâtre abstrait. Drame pur. Anti-thématique,..." (NCN 254-5). An alternative is to turn language into an 'object' in its own right, to play with it so that meaning arises out of distortions and differences within language, not from its referents.²⁹ Here irony dies because one half of its dual structure (the real world) is left out. Another technique which similarly creates meaning from within linguistic form is the use of words musically through repetitions and echoes and patterns of repetitions and echoes. Pirandello verges on such a technique in his onslaught on the unknowable in "Di sera, un geranio" but it is in the work of Beckett that it is refined.³⁰

A final exit from the eternal dialectic of irony can be found in a form of entropy, an abdication to the Nothingness which levels out all points of view. Ionesco's balletic endings suggest something of this. The switch from words to physical movement may be seen as the mind's renunci-

ation of the effort to control the vertiginous transcendencies of irony. A parallel in thematic terms may be seen perhaps in Pirandello's "Paura d'esser felice" where Fabio Feroni ironises himself into madness by trying to be totally conscious of the ironies of life. Kierkegaard may have been describing this process when he wrote that "because he [the ironist] lives completely hypothetically and subjunctively, his life finally loses all continuity. With this he wholly lapses under the sway of his moods and feelings".³¹ As many commentators have observed, irony can become a self-defeating disease of the spirit involving "the reduction of all reality to the bare self-consciousness of the completely bored ironist."³² This is a position which Ionesco only narrowly avoids.³³

There is also an alternative and more positive pattern within Romantic Irony, one in which illusion is transcended then recreated on a different plane within life, not outside it. The initial destruction precedes revitalisation. The structure is evident in the cases of the mystics who glimpse eternity beyond life then on turning back to the physical world see more richly than before. This pattern is peculiar to Pirandello and may perhaps be attributable to the influence of Schlegel who saw Romantic Irony as recreative rather than something which spirals outwards in a series of never-ending transcendencies towards nothingness. Ionesco, by contrast, pursues the ironies to their ultimate stalemate. The Romantic Ironist is ever conscious of the fact that life will not let go of its victims. But where a new plane of perception is not achieved, the ironist remains caught between cosmic and earthly perspectives. "He beholds man from contrasting angles of vision as ape and angel, worm and son of God, mechanical monster and pure spirit, immortal being and ignominious creature of dust."³⁴

III The Grotesque

One style of writing which matches this double perspective is the 'grotesque', in certain senses which I shall clarify. As in "umorismo", a clash of images produces an unresolved response in the reader or observer. While "umorismo" arises from the co-presence of the comic and the pitiful, the grotesque may marry the comic or the banal with the monstrous, the terrible or the horrific. This mixture produces a reaction composed of laughter, astonishment and either disgust or horror. The grotesque may occur naturally or it may be wilfully imposed on a subject by a writer or painter for satirical purposes. The mode challenges notions of what is real and normal and is therefore frequently a tool of the fantastical writer. It need not necessarily carry a 'frisson' of the beyond, however. For Pirandello the existence of the grotesque in real life suggests the ineluctable awfulness of life, an awfulness which humans attempt to mask and which therefore assumes the same structural role as the other-worldly beyond. While "umorismo" may embrace the cosmic and the minute and so evade the 'normal' on two fronts, the effect of the grotesque relies on the presence of the familiar alongside something which exaggerates or deviates from the familiar.³⁵

The word 'grotesque' originated with the discovery of some cave ("grotta") paintings in Rome in the fifteenth century, in which the distinctions between animals and plants were dissolved. The natural order of things was subverted. The paintings depicted a world which did not tally with the usual human taxonomy.³⁶ Since then the grotesque has also been used to describe work in which the symmetry and proportions of individual objects are violated. The grotesque may serve the same function as the absurd or mystical experience in that it estranges the subject from his familiar reality and casts doubt on the way human beings organise their

world. Wolfgang Kayser defines the grotesque as "the estranged world, our world which has been transformed".³⁷ The shock of the grotesque is not in the presentation of the totally alien but in its proximity to the banal and normal.

Geoffrey Harpham makes the point that "each age redefines the grotesque in terms of what threatens its sense of essential humanity."³⁸ In the light of this, it is interesting that the grotesque in the twentieth century draws heavily on puppets (the human become machine) and animals. In accordance with its origins, the grotesque is often dependent on visual detail but in the twentieth century the same effect of breaking down the habitual notions of the real has been achieved by presenting the patently unreal in a matter of fact tone, as though it were normal. The clash between the banal and the monstrous now takes place also between subject matter and style. Schlegel, who is recognised for his uncannily accurate visions of the development of art, defined the grotesque as the clash between form and content.³⁹ The best example of this is Kafka's "Die Verwandlung" but Ionesco's Rhinocéros with its literalisation of a metaphor is also an instance. In Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser the metaphors of the weight of the past, or "the skeleton in the cupboard" or of life being poisoned by a past act come startlingly to life in the growing corpse with its glowing eyes and its offspring of mushrooms. The ambiguity of the grotesque clash between Amédée's pathetic character and the macabre corpse is deepened by the fact that the audience is never clearly told what the corpse represents. The audience cannot take refuge in allegory. It is significant that in this play Ionesco eventually resolves the clash between the earthly and the cosmic when Amédée escapes, and in doing so the corpse ceases to be threatening and becomes merely ridiculous. By contrast, Ionesco's 'récit' "La Vase" begins in the familiar world and gradually degenerates to the point where the first person narrator describes his

limbs detaching themselves from his body until all that remains is one eye "et c'est avec l'image bleu d'un ciel lavé que je partis" (LPC 161). The manner in which the narrating consciousness extricates himself from his body leaving it to sink into a marsh suggests that Kayser's notion of the grotesque as "primarily the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe" is close to the truth.⁴⁰ If the grotesque of Kafka and Ionesco is related to a sense of the alienation of the self and the world, the earlier Italian Teatro del Grottesco or the "grotteschi" was based on the division of the Self (into, for example, private self and public image in Chiarelli's play La maschera e il volto) and produced puppet-like characters.⁴¹

Like "umorismo" and the Absurd experience, the grotesque has a double effect and can be both liberating and threatening. It breaks down one definition of the normal and is therefore disturbing. But it can also reconcile us with the irrational or the uncategorisable by simply exposing us to it.⁴² Kayser suggests that the grotesque exorcises the demonic.⁴³ The horrific is tamed by the comic but conversely it could be claimed that the horrific unsettles the comic perspective.

Some of the themes which Kayser identifies as lending themselves to the grotesque are the Apocalypse and the Dance of Death. The Bérenger of Le Piéton de l'air returns from his trip to the end of the universe full of visions of outsized animals, humans with geese's heads and of bestial behaviour. The grotesque here serves as a rider to Bérenger's earlier other-worldly enthusiasm. Jeux de massacre, whose very title announces the co-presence of incompatibles, is Ionesco's Dance of Death.⁴⁴ The playfulness resides in the sheer random proliferation of deaths in the absence of any involvement with the characters, with the exception of one scene. Here in its extreme form is the grotesque in the service of a vision of the fragility of human order and of futility. In La Leçon the presence of the

grotesque is a direct effect of Ionesco's attempt to make his audience experience the irrational which lies behind the most banal and innocuous of situations (in this case, a lesson). The grotesque clash between the pedagogical nonsense and the teacher's wrath comes to full fruition in the 'coup' that the girl is the fortieth pupil to be murdered that day.

Whereas Ionesco has succeeded in making the grotesque a structural principle, Pirandello tends to use isolated grotesque touches alongside irony and humour. Indeed his grotesque very nearly merges with black humour. A case in point is that of the digesting corpse mentioned at the end of L'umorismo. The idea of a living process continuing in something dead may perhaps lead us to reconsider our notions of life and death. The comical noise clashes appallingly with the solemn emotions of the mourners and the fact that it should issue from the very object of their grief adds a further derisory quality. The physical processes of death and images of deformity are frequently two of the poles around which Pirandello constructs his grotesque writing.

"La toccatina", in an interesting movement from the predominantly horrific grotesque as a physical state to the mainly comic grotesque as an aesthetic device, presents Pirandello's world in microcosm. First we see the horror of Beniamino's paralysis through Golisch's eyes. The ambiguity of the grotesque as the estrangement of the normal is explicit. Golisch is "agghiacciato dall'impressione di non aver più dinanzi un uomo" and suffers "la costernazione strana che a mano a mano lo vinceva nel vedersi accanto quell'uomo toccato dalla morte, quasi morte per metà e cangiato..." (NA I 261). But when Golisch in his turn is similarly paralysed and smitten with the comic speech fault of only being able to enunciate German, the grotesque changes emphasis because of the comic effect of the repetition. When the men's former companion, Nadina, opens her door to "quei due fantasmi ansimanti", "Non sa se debba piangere o ridere." (NA I 269) The effect of

the grotesque is strengthened by the irony of Golisch's declared intention earlier of killing himself if ever he suffered the same fate as Beniamino. The novella gives an exaggerated image or a reductio ad absurdum of Pirandello's world in which physical form is cruelly unjust and man must operate within the narrow limits of his faculties in an awareness of their inadequacy: the world of the two men shrinks to foot exercises, to the objects which constitute the "tre tappe della passeggiata giornaliera". The suggestion is that their struggles are of the same order as those of the people around them: "la vita gli turbinava intorno, agitata da tante passioni, premuta da tante cure," while they inch their way to the doctor's (NA I 263). Yet this derisory state of affairs is rendered tolerable by the fact that they are both sharing the same suffering.

If in "La toccatina" the grotesque serves a vision of human solidarity in the face of a fate which mocks us, Pirandello is also adept at using the grotesque as one mode of writing amongst many. The resulting jamboree of perspectives creates a further grotesque dualism in that it emphasises the underlying emptiness of life on the other side of all man's words and forms. This technique is evident in "Visitare gli infermi" which shows a number of parallels with Così' è (si vi pare). Pirandello depicts the theatricality of small town life where all is spectacle and raw material for endless talk which in the end masks the reality of events. The death of Gaspare Naldi, described in close physical detail, is horrific. Pirandello juxtaposes this man's solitary drama with the social comedy of his neighbours – their egotism and snobbery, their vanity and their lust to see everything so that they can be the ones who narrate the death to the others, their desire to be respected for their knowledge. Death becomes entertainment and is turned into narrative. The comedy of the neighbours' gossiping is set against both the anguished silence of the relatives and the beauty of the night sky.

The contrast between the airless, claustrophobic room where the corpse rattles and twists and the freshness of the vast valley outside suggests how death has been robbed of its meaning. Doctor Bax stands on the balcony and

contemplò a lungo l'ampia vallata che sotto il colle su cui sorge la città s'allarga, degradando fino al mare laggiù in fondo, rischiarato quella sera dalla luna. Compreso dal mistero della morte, contemplò in alto gli astri impalliditi dal chiaror lunare. Ma nessuna relazione, veramente, agli occhi suoi tra quel cielo e quell'anima che agonizzava crudelmente dentro la stanza (NA II 109).

The grotesque behaviour of the neighbours is reinforced when Bax recounts a medical school anecdote to a group of gawping locals about the gas from a corpse blowing out his candle.

In "Visitare gli infermi" Pirandello uses the grotesque as the basis for the conflict of an entire novella. In other works he will use a single grotesque emblem to encapsulate a character's dilemma. In "Il bottone della palandrana" don Filiberto Fiorinanzi's naive belief in an ordered, just world is undermined when he discovers dishonesty to be an integral part of that world. The relationship between the neat order of the illusion and the complexity of reality is suggested through the grotesque contrast in the eyes of the Marchese Di Giorgi-Decarpi: the one is cold and fixed because made of glass while the other is real but "un languido melenso occhio svogliato" (NA I 1143). Don Filiberto initially mistakes the stern glass one for a real one just as he had thought the world to be rigid. The grotesque here serves the juxtaposition of reality and what men make of it.

IV The fantastic

Pirandello and Ionesco share an interest in authors concerned with the grotesque and the fantastic. In L'umorismo Pirandello cites Chamisso's classic tale of the double Peter Schlemihl and Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment, and he certainly knew work by Hoffmann and Poe.⁴⁵ Ionesco points to influence from Dostoyevsky, Kafka and Borges.⁴⁶ Some discussion of the distinguishing characteristics of these modes of writing will clarify their relationship with the visionary theme and their place in the work of these two authors.

While the grotesque makes the observer or reader question reality because it juxtaposes elements which out of fear or for reasons of propriety are conventionally kept separate, or because it transforms reality slightly, the fantastic questions the real explicitly. Uncertainty about the reality of something is the concern of both the reader and the main character. As Rosemary Jackson defines it, "the fantastic is a mode of writing which enters a dialogue with the 'real' and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure."⁴⁷ Uncertainty and disquiet are both the theme and effect of fantastic writing.⁴⁸ The fantastic overlaps with the grotesque on many details. Both elicit an unresolved, ambiguous response. In the grotesque the perceiver is caught between laughter and horror while in the fantastic he vacillates between belief and disbelief. The fantastic also relies on its proximity to the real for its effects.⁴⁹ The common use of the word 'fantasy' (as in 'a fantasy world' or 'a male fantasy') to suggest complete freedom from the demands of reality and other people is misleading here. Where a totally 'other', ideal world is constructed we are in the presence of the marvellous or the faery, according to the classification established by Todorov. The fantastic by contrast is concerned with all that is 'other' to the dominant

definition of reality, a definition which is created both ideologically and by the mere limitations of the human senses. Fantasy is a relational mode, existing only in relation to the familiar or normal. This is neatly revealed in the vocabulary of the fantastic which is full of negations of something present, tangible, visible etc.: in-visible, un-real, im-possible, un-known. Freud's word for the uncanny "Unheimlich" is the negated version of 'heimlich' meaning both homely or familiar and that which is concealed.⁵⁰ Sartre's view of the fantastic too focuses on this negational structure. For him, fantasy inverts the natural and normal world.⁵¹

Being explicitly concerned with what is beyond reality, the fantastic is more 'other-worldly' than the grotesque and it has a number of features which relate it closely to mysticism. Its emphasis on something which is beyond words and reason inevitably shows these up as inadequate and challenges the criteria by which the world is labelled and categorised.⁵² Irène Bessière in a discussion of madness in the context of the fantastic, notes "La folie marque la vanité des notions de limite et de discrimination. Le fantastique fait de cette vanité son sujet."⁵³ The Absurd, mysticism and the fantastic all show up the real as a product of certain sign systems. Jackson, paraphrasing Cixous, notes that "The uncanny, ... removes structure. It empties the 'real' of its meaning, it leaves signs without significance."⁵⁴ Just as mystical writings often lament the impotence of words in describing God or the Absolute, so fantastic literature frequently contains expressions of the difficulty of describing what was seen or sensed and in so doing focuses attention on human media. The impotence of signs results either in "semiotic excess" or in the reference to nameless Things - It, the Thing - or else in the invention of new words. The processes of the mind and of perception - especially vision - are often themes in fantastic literature. As Sartre notes "la loi du genre le

condamne à ne rencontrer jamais que des outils."⁵⁵

Cixous' statement that the uncanny "asserts a gap where one would like to be assured of unity" indicates that the fantastic is closely related to the Absurd and mysticism in the psychological impulses which they express.⁵⁶ As Jackson puts it, "It [the fantastic] expresses a desire for an absolute, for an absolute signified, an absolute meaning."⁵⁷ The breaking-up of man-made categories in the fantastic is a prelude to a return to a state of undifferentiation and entropy. Recognisable here is the drive Freud identified as a death wish, not literally a desire for extinction but rather for universal equality and absolute unity of self and other. Jackson, discussing Sade and Lautréamont, says "Their desire for 'a non-relationship of zero, where identity is meaningless' is analogous to a mystical quest for union with an absolute 'Other'."⁵⁸ This can also be seen as a return to the vision of the child who cannot distinguish objects clearly and does not experience the world as fragmented.⁵⁹

The co-presence of qualities belonging to the fantastic mode and mystical themes in the writings of Pirandello and Ionesco is particularly interesting in the light of the way the fantastic has evolved in relation to the progressive secularisation of culture. In religious cultures the 'other' or the demonic is conceived as transcendent or supernatural and is often animate, in the form of devils or semi-human creatures. In secular cultures the demonic other is no longer external to man but is located within the human mind which projects fears and desires on the world. According to Todorov's schema, religious cultures have produced 'Marvel-
lous' writing while secular cultures produce uncanny work. Between these two extremes stands pure fantasy in which no explanations can be found for the sense of strangeness. This type of fantastic writing was prevalent in the nineteenth century, the century of realism. It acted as a kind of compensation for the dominance of realism, and was in Todorov's words "rien

d'autre que la mauvaise conscience de ce XIX^e siècle positiviste."⁶⁰ The 'other' gradually becomes earthbound and is recognised as generated by the self and by the beyond within man. Bellemin-Noël goes as far as to say that "one could define fantastic literature as that in which the question of the unconscious emerges".⁶¹ The search for the absolute which the fantastic articulates becomes in the modern era a confrontation with matter. "All that the modern fantastic suggests, from Frankenstein onwards, is the impotence of mind to transcend matter..."⁶²

The works of Pirandello and Ionesco bear witness to this shift in their treatment of the unconscious and in the failure of the mystical quest, and yet at the same time they suggest the possibility of a transcendent other. The ambiguity is strongest in Pirandello where sometimes there is only a void behind constructions and other times there is a suggestion of a cosmic force, "Essere", or of the supernatural. From one point of view the presence of elements of the fantastic in Pirandello's writing is surprising given his relativism. If all truth is individual and subjective, the issue of whether something is true or not does not arise. Yet much of his work is concerned with the classic themes of fantastic texts – death, dream, hallucination, illness, the irrational, the lost selves behind the culturally-formed self and madness. His texts repeatedly show a narrow definition of reality under onslaught from dreams, the unconscious, the random and the sexual.⁶³ The problem of the multiplicity of personality which dogs so many Pirandellian protagonists is also a central theme in fantastic literature which in the nineteenth century often becomes a dialogue between the self and its repressed fragments. One link between this and a religious view of life was suggested by Friedrich Schlegel. Man used to conduct dialogues with God but in his absence, these are internalised with the result that an "intrinsic dualism and duplicity is our condition of being" and "we are constrained to recognise our inmost

being as essentially dramatic."⁶⁴ A remnant of that dialogue with God can perhaps be seen in the way Pirandello's characters interact with the landscape around them. Landscapes in Pirandello's work exude spirituality and represent the eternal, the unchanging and the peaceful in contrast to the tormented fluidity of the human world.⁶⁵ The 'double' too is constantly in the background in his work, whether as a reflection in a mirror or a portrait or as a character's glimpses of what he might have been or of a reality which he might have known. "The double", writes Jackson, signifies a desire to be re-united with a lost centre of personality..."⁶⁶

The fragmentation of self is also presented on a less transcendental level and this has become a constant feature of the fantastic in the twentieth century. It is no longer a clash between positivism and the unreal but between impersonal, mechanised systems and the alienated inner world of the individual. This dilemma, which is a major preoccupation in Ionesco's plays, is prefigured in Pirandello's characters who complain how their social role fails to represent them as they feel themselves to be. Yet even where Pirandello shows explicitly that the 'other' is of psychological, repressed origin, he frequently hints at the influence of occult forces. As Bonifazi rightly says "l'umorismo pirandelliano è sempre a un passo dal fantastico."⁶⁷ The lust ("quel divino accecamento") which overtakes Romeo Daddi and Ginevra in Non si sa come is seen as "un gorgo", a power which overcomes them, denying consciousness and the will. Similarly, in "Pena di vivere così", signora Leuca's repressed sexuality is given a supernatural resonance. The uncanny atmosphere is created by the repeated references to the "silenzio di specchio" and the "lindura" of the house. The unseen narrator recounts events in a self-consciously reticent, formal style which succeeds in hinting at secret, sinister things. The repetition and sense of false restraint lend the writing a tension and a strange tilt. Furthermore Pirandello animates the objects which have a

close link with signora Leuca's way of life. Her 'other' makes itself felt in the spaces within her reality and, like the Absurd crisis or the mystical moment, destroys time and meaning so that the world around her is estranged:

Ma c'è pur questo silenzio che a volte, tra un punto e l'altro della maglietta di lana per una bimba povera del quartiere, o tra un rigo e l'altro del libro che sta leggendo, pare sprofondi tutt'a un tratto nel tempo senza fine e vi renda vani, o piuttosto, sconsolati ogni opera. Gli occhi si fissano su un oggetto della stanza e, per quanto li' da tanto tempo e familiare, quell'oggetto è come se non l'abbiano mai veduto, o come se tutt'a un tratto si sia votato d'ogni senso (NA I 1070).

In a later passage the estranged reality has become an 'other' reality:

La vita le si è quasi diradata fino al punto che le relazioni tra lei e le cose più consuete non hanno più talvolta nessuna certezza, e le avviene allora di scoprire di quelle cose tutt'a un tratto aspetti nuovi e strani che la turbano, come se d'improvviso e per un attimo lei penetrasse in un'altra insospettata realtà che le cose abbiano per sé, nascosta, oltre quella che comunemente si dà loro. Teme d'impazzire, a fissarcisi (NA I 1071).

Open-endedness is a feature of fantastic writing though Pirandello's use of it is not always in the service of the fantastic. In "Dal naso al cielo", however, Pirandello leaves the reader with a choice: either the senator has been the victim of supernatural forces or he has succumbed to his heart condition. This novella, pitching the scientist against the 'spiritualist' (whose name is appropriately enough Dionisio Vernoni), conforms to the modern fantastic as Jackson sees it. "A vast gap is opened up between knowledge (as scientific investigation and rational enquiry) and gnosis (a knowledge of ultimate truths, a kind of spiritualist wisdom), and it is in this gap that the modern fantastic is situated."⁶⁸

In Pirandello's final novella "Una giornata", fantasy as an "art of estrangement" can be seen at its best.⁶⁹ Dostoyevsky thought that the fantastic was the best mode for suggesting a sense of alienation from 'natural' origins. In "Una giornata" it is no longer a question of the real world invaded and undermined by the strange and inexplicable: the

real world is strange in itself. Disorientation is total. The protagonist does not know where he is, why or how he came to be there. The story is written so that the reader is strung between two time scales. Here is the life of a man recounted as though it were just a day and vice versa. The typical actions of a day are presented in tandem with birth, growing up, parenthood and old age. The protagonist himself speaks as though he is seeing everything for the first time and from the outside. In this type of fantastic writing, it is not that the supernatural takes over the protagonist but rather life itself is something which happens to him for no explicable reason.⁷⁰ The story has much in common with Ionesco's "La Vase" and expresses the Ionescan sense of "l'insolite", of stupor and of the sheer oddness of existence.

... atterrito come sono dall'eco che hanno fatto i miei passi nel silenzio, mi guardo le mani, me le osservo per un verso e per l'altro, le chiudo, le riapro, mi tasto con esse, mi cerco addosso, anche per sentire come son fatto, perché non posso più esser certo nemmeno di questo: ch'io realmente esista e che tutto questo sia vero (NA II 899).

As in "La Vase" and much of Ionesco's theatre, the reader is unsure of the status or level of the text which he is unable to 'tame' by writing it off as mere dream or hallucination. Many elements of the story are quintessentially Absurd: the sense of being thrown into life ("Geworfenheit" in Heidegger's term), the feeling of merely playing a role or of gesturing one's way through life without understanding it, a nightmarish sense of time passing and of life being quite outside one's control. "Mi sento come trascinare, ma anche qui senz'avvertire che mi si faccia violenza" (NA II 900). The sense of alienation, as in Ionesco's work, is explicitly and repeatedly linked to the perception of a child. "Possibile però ch'io sia già tanto cresciuto, rimanendo sempre come un bambino e senz'aver fatto mai nulla?" (NA II 900).

It is this sense of the oddness of life, "l'insolite", which Ionesco

attempts to convey in his early plays. But rather than the fantastic it is the elements of nonsense, parody and satire which predominate. We are not invited at any point to question the reality of what we see. The characters are not tormented by ambiguity and we are encouraged to laugh at, not join in with, the Smiths and the Martins attempting to deduce the law for the ringing of their front doorbell.

Ionesco's plays sometimes verge on the fantastic but usually the invasion of the unknown is given metaphorical or symbolic significance and the uncertainty is defused by the explanations. Several meanings are offered for the corpse in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser and although the question is never resolved, the audience is at no point made to feel that it is a real phenomenon. The main question in the play is not so much the identity or nature of the corpse but what it means in terms of the relationship between Amédée and Madeleine. Rhinocéros displays a similar structure in that the 'monsters' are allegories but it also shows a similarity with some monster stories in the fantastic mode. Stories such as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein can be seen as expressing the Faust myth on a human level; the urge to go beyond human limits is seen to fail and the result is the monstrous, a "grotesque parody of the human longing for the more than human".⁷¹ This is interesting in the light of Rhinocéros where the transformation into bellowing pachyderms is a symbol of the human desire for unity (conformity and homogeneity) taken to absolute and irrational extremes. The desire for the other no longer has supernatural outlets but remains earthbound with dire consequences.

Clearly in the fantastic mode is "La Vase" where the protagonist and the reader are unable to find an explanation for the "symptômes du mal" (LPC 131). The protagonist describes his bizarre disintegration in the most clinical of terms. His dissolution into mud shows the pull of fantasy towards entropy. The grey weather and colourless landscapes reflect this:

"un matin blême d'automne", "une campagne morne" (LPC 153).⁷² As in "Una giornata", the alienation is total: from the 'social', from the body, from life itself. But whereas Pirandello's fantastic writing is predominantly uncanny with hints of the supernatural demonic, Ionesco's, like Kafka's, is concerned to present to the reader a 'given' state of strangeness characterised by an excess of objects and an absence of meaning.

V From Incongruity to Consciousness

Finally there are some aesthetic techniques found in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco which do not fall into any category but which are also characterised by a double structure. One brand of incongruity is particularly germane to the Absurd and involves a clash of the cosmic and the excremental. Pirandello touches on this in theory at the end of L'umorismo when he refers to the humorist's "ricerca dei particolari più intimi e minuti, che possono anche parer volgari e triviali ..." (SPSV 159).⁷³ Monstrous events are predicated on minute and banal causes. Pirandello quotes Pascal's example of Cleopatra's nose in his essay and one thinks of the fatal red hairs on the white calf of Mr. Walston in "Pubertà". The ability to load such physical details with the full weight of human anguish is found more in Beckett's work than in Ionesco's. Maddy Rooney in All that fall struggles to meet her husband at the station and on the way is offered a "small load of dung" and "tormented by retired bill-brokers". She can barely move yet her speech is laced with bawdy witticisms rubbing shoulders with lamentation, nostalgia and yearnings for disintegration and the loosening of her corset.⁷⁴ Perhaps the best and most grotesque instance in Beckett's work is from Waiting for Godot in which Vladimir and Estragon consider hanging themselves as a way to procure a fleeting carnal pleasure.⁷⁵ Something of the same incongruity can be found too in Camus' description in Le Mythe de Sisyphe of how the glance of a man walking to the scaffold falls on a shoelace.⁷⁶ This mixing of levels creates a kind of tension in the writing which can be seen as an expression of the impossibility of casting off the physical and of ascending to pure mind or spirit. Ionesco sees a new kind of theatre in such tension:

Tragique et farce, prosaïsme et poétique, réalisme et fantastique, quotidien et insolite, voilà peut-être les principes contradictoires (il n'y a de théâtre que s'il y a des antagonismes) qui

constituent les bases d'une construction théâtrale possible
(NCN 62).

The technique of matching the trivial and the lofty is present too in Ionesco's work but it has a very different effect. In Pirandello and Beckett the banal details have a psychological authenticity which serves to heighten the tension. In Ionesco the details tend to be nonsensical or silly with the result that tension is defused and the audience is distanced by the self-mockery. The mixture of Béranger's anguish and the prattling of the English folk in the first scenes of Le Piéton de l'air is one instance of this.

The aesthetic devices we have just described frequently work simultaneously and indicate that the aim of these two writers is a radical disorientation, both emotional and intellectual, of their readers and spectators. It is in the way they subsequently direct the disorientated consciousness that we can perceive a slight difference in the final positions of the two.

V (1) Le Roi se meurt

In Ionesco's Le Roi se meurt the process which King Bérenger must undergo is replicated in the audience because of the clashing perspectives within the text. Just as the King vacillates between arrogance and insight, so the audience is tossed between involvement and detachment until the semi-resolution brought by the King's death. Death here is conceived as a radical decentering, a passage from a self-centered world to the universe in which the self is one thing amongst millions of others.

Juliette: ... Il était le roi d'un grand royaume.

Marie: Il en était le centre. Il en était le coeur. (TH IV 62).

The notion of kingship in the play is linked to the idea that each man lives in an illusory world which masks his mortality and meaninglessness. When Bérenger begins to weaken, the physical structure of his universe, his kingdom, begins to crumble with him. At the beginning of the play Bérenger still believes in his omnipotence: he will decide for himself when he will die. The play plots his progressive loss of control over himself, his kingdom, his wives and his servants. Dying means having to accept the 'other'. "Il s' imagine qu'il est tout." says Marguerite, "Il croit que son être est tout l'être. Il faut bien lui faire sortir cela de la tête" (TH IV 71). He must realise his own smallness and his status as a mere creature. The Doctor tells him in rather Borgesian tones:

Il sera une page dans un livre de dix mille pages que l'on mettra dans une bibliothèque qui aura un million de livres, une bibliothèque parmi un million de bibliothèques (TH IV 64).

His attendants try to convince him that "la vie est un exil" and that "vous retournerez dans votre patrie" (TH IV 45). Marie and Juliette attempt to invoke the 'other' world which Bérenger cannot remember and which does not interest him in the slightest.

Marie: Autre monde, monde perdu, monde oublié, monde englouti, remontez à la surface.

Juliette: Autre plaine, autre montagne, autre vallée...
(TH IV 45)

while Marguerite tells him to try and go beyond memories. Gradually he comes to accept and recognise other lives, first of all Juliette's. Just as the protagonist of Pirandello's "Da sé" walks to his grave and suddenly sees more of life than he had ever seen before, so Bérenger's consciousness is suddenly expanded and minute, banal things become a source of wonder. "Je n'avais encore jamais remarqué que les carottes étaient si belles" (TH IV 51). He passes from being all - "Derrière toute chose, je suis" (TH IV 67) - to experiencing a vision of plurality and unity at once:

... deux soleils, deux lunes, deux voutes célestes l'éclairent, un autre soleil se lève, un autre encore. Un troisième firmament surgit, jaillit, se déploie! Tandis qu'un soleil se couche, d'autres se lèvent... A la fois, l'aube et le crépuscule...
(TH IV 72).

He then sloughs off all his faculties until he can only murmur "Moi" and finally "Bleu, bleu". The suggestion would seem to be that Bérenger not only leaves the world of which he was the centre but also himself.

The subject of death is one which lends itself easily to sentimentality. Ionesco has drawn here on a range of devices which prevent the audience from identifying with or pitying Bérenger. The death is strongly ritualised and there are several reminders to the audience that they are watching a play. The overall ironic tone of the piece is announced in the opening music which is "dérisoirement royale." Juxtaposed with the royal setting of crowns, robes and thrones are some banal, less than regal details: there are cigarette ends in the living room and cobwebs in the bedroom. The king himself first appears barefoot, virtually identical to Pirandello's vision of the king in his nightshirt in L'umorismo. The king, far from being noble and dignified, is selfish, childish, pathetic and finally just a man: his throne is exchanged for a wheelchair. The language of the play wavers between mock-erudition, word-play and inven-

tion, and incantation and invocation. Space simultaneously expands and contracts as the frame of reference concerns the cosmos one moment and then cats and carrots the next. There is a constant doubling too caused by the sparring of the two Queens who in turn are often deflated by Juliette and the Guard.⁷⁷ Whereas the Guard lists Béranger's achievements which range through all times and all fields, Béranger himself delivers a child-like piece on a cat he once had. We are told too of the atrocities he has committed against his enemies. Time too contracts and expands at once throughout the play: Béranger has been alive 283 years or five minutes.

The constant doubling of perspectives and tones is partly resolved at the end of the play. 'Partly' because although the doubleness disappears, the audience is still left in uncertainty. It is not clear where Béranger is going. As at the end of "La Vase", the protagonist simply disappears and whether he disappears to somewhere or simply ceases to exist is left open.

A second type of conclusion to the quest in Ionesco's plays is a stasis, a state of waiting or stalemate. The subject is suspended between the cast-off earthly reality and an unreachable or perhaps non-existent 'beyond'. In plays such as Tueur sans gages, L'homme aux valises and Voyages chez les morts the protagonist has reached the limit of the known and can go no further. He remains on the edge of life gazing out at the wall before him or surrounded by the futile, frenetic activity of his fellows.

V (ii) Sisyphus and L'uomo dal fiore in bocca: consciousness and contemplation

In Pirandello's work the double perspective similarly serves both to disrupt a monological view of life and to indicate the impossibility of transcendence. But he also depicts a third stance in which the double perspective continues, not on the outer limit of reality, but within it, simply through the agency of renewed perception. This is notably the case for Belluca of "Il treno ha fischiato" in which the beyond is not transcendental but merely the possibility of the existence of a different kind of life. Typically the revolution in Belluca's consciousness is precipitated by something as random and banal as the whistle of a train. Belluca's being is transformed by the mere awareness of the independent existence of a wider world. In "Rimedio: la geografia" the focusing on another life is a conscious device employed by the protagonist. The body remains constrained by the here and now, while the mind rises out of contingency. These perspective stories of Pirandello's are a celebration of the mobility of the human consciousness which exists alongside his representation of it as a mechanism which 'fixes' life and refuses fluidity. Consciousness has a double value: it may construct and distort but it is capable of awareness of those processes and in the form of imagination it can expand human horizons and transcend the evidence of the senses. The theme is explicit in "Sopra e sotto" whose style reflects the mobility of perspective implied in the title.⁷⁸ Pirandello returns to the idea first explored in L'umorismo that if the human mind is capable of taking the cosmic view of affairs and seeing them as small and futile then that very ability is in fact a proof of man's greatness. Although Lamella seems to get the better of Sabato in terms of the abstract argument, the physical details of the story suggest the necessity of both views and in fact the story fades out in the middle of an exchange. Sabato's view is

determined by his recent bereavement. The clash of intellect and death is expressed in the split topography of roof under the stars and candlelit deathbed, and by the descriptions of the drinks: "E bevevano. Vino, il professor Sabato: vino, fino a schiattarne: voleva morire. Il professor Lamella, birra: non voleva morire" (NA I 499). The abstractness of the argument is similarly offset by the grotesque physical details and the comedy of inebriation: professor Sabato - "tozzo, pingue, calvo" - sobs and scratches the "peli da orso" on his chest, and when he finally kneels before his wife's corpse he falls flat on his face and "gli venne fuori con suono stridulo e imbrogliato il ritornello d'una canzonettaccia francese: 'Mets-la en trou...'" (NA I 504).

The classic Absurdist Camus in Le Mythe de Sisyphe comes to perceive a double value in human consciousness, as he does also in the Absurd crisis, seen here as concluding in a dialectical tension. To annihilate consciousness (commit suicide) or to turn away from the contingent reality of the world is to give victory to the Absurd which must be confronted not escaped. "Nier l'un des termes de l'opposition dont il vit, c'est lui échapper" (LMS 76). The Absurd should not be overcome but placed at the centre of one's life as its fundamental reality. An awareness of death must inform all acts. "Conscience et révolte ces refus sont le contraire du renoncement" (LMS 78).

It is strange to find that "conscience" is cited as a weapon against the Absurd when the alienation central to the experience is attributed to the fact of man's possession of consciousness.⁷⁹ This shift is characteristic of Camus' stance: the Absurd finally becomes positive on the basis of the very reasons which initially made it negative. The lack of a given meaning in life gains a positive status if it is stated that life can be lived all the better if it has no meaning because it then has no limitations. The Absurd becomes for Camus a liberation. Absurd man is

freed from the mechanical life of habit: "Il goûte une liberté à l'égard des règles communes.... Le retour à la conscience, l'évasion hors du sommeil quotidien figurent les premières démarches de la liberté absurde."

(LMS 82-3) The inevitability of death and the absence of eternal life provoke an orientation towards the present, resulting in a quantitative ethic: life must be lived more fully not escaped. We find in Camus the pattern we have traced in Pirandello's portraits of people faced with imminent death: their attention detaches itself from the human comedy to focus fully and fervently on the simple fact of being alive. Physical living is heightened:

La divine disponibilité du condamné à mort devant qui s'ouvrent les portes de la prison par une certaine petite aube, cet incroyable désintéressement à l'égard de tout, sauf de la flamme pure de la vie, la mort et l'absurde sont ici, on le sent bien, les principes de la seule liberté raisonnable:... (LMS 83).⁸⁰

This is precisely Ionesco's position in the moments of respite from his death anxiety.

Remembering the descriptions of the Absurd at the opening of Camus' essay, it is strange to read at the end of "la plus pure des joies qui est de sentir et de sentir sur cette terre" (LMS 88). Similarly, having read earlier of the impotence of the rational intelligence in the face of reality, it is surprising to find Camus enthusing "Pour un homme sans oeillères, il n'est plus beau spectacle que celui de l'intelligence aux prises avec une réalité qui le dépasse" (LMS 78). But that "réalité" is not the anthropocentric reality lived before the Absurd crisis. The post-Absurd consciousness will be constantly scrutinising its own limits and will be aware of itself:

Vivre, c'est faire vivre l'absurde. Le faire vivre, c'est avant tout le regarder.... Elle [la révolte] est un confrontation perpétuel de l'homme et de sa propre obscurité. Elle est exigence d'une impossible transparence. Elle remet le monde en question à chacune de ses secondes (LMS 76-7).

This double 'look' - towards life and towards death - is reminiscent of

Pirandello's double stance before life in L'umorismo, which involves a distanced participation. Camus' emphasis on the liberating effect of lucidity also brings to mind Pirandello's view of man as an intellectual worm. The mind can rise above direct experience to the metalevel; this is essentially what consciousness is.

The parallel between the action of consciousness and the visionary moment is clearest when Camus discusses his Absurd hero, Sisyphus. He is seen as surviving on the moment of contemplation permitted him when his rock rolls back down the hill yet again:

Je vois cet homme redescendre d'un pas lourd mais égal vers le tourment dont il ne connaîtra pas la fin. Cette heure qui est comme une respiration et qui revient aussi sûrement que son malheur, cette heure est celle de la conscience.... La clairvoyance qui devait faire son tourment consomme du même coup sa victoire (LMS 163-4).

The ambiguity of the Absurd is made more explicit later: "Le bonheur et l'absurde sont deux fils de la même terre. Ils sont inséparables" (LMS 165). Sisyphus' liberation is not physical but mental. Like mysticism, Absurd freedom is the liberation of the mind from its own clutches.

Camus emphasises that Sisyphus was not punished simply for defying the gods but because of his passion for life in all its physicality. This love of life is also a strong motif in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco. It is the other side of their protest against the reduction and degradation of life at the hands of a myopic absolutism. Writing to Domenico Vittorini, Pirandello said "Ma pure la vita, anche per tutto quello che m'ha fatto soffrire, è così bella!"⁸¹ Ionesco too sees a love of life as an integral part of his revolt: "C'est contre la loi naturelle que je m'insurge.... J'aime l'Être. Je l'aime, passionément, amoureuxment. Qu'est-ce qui fait que des gens acceptent la mort?" (ANT 194). But if Sisyphus triumphs by taking the 'astral' view of his condition, Camus also hints at the enhanced perception of it when he returns to his rock:

Cet univers désormais sans maître ne lui paraît ni stérile ni futile. Chacun des grains de cette pierre, chaque éclat minéral de cette montagne pleine de nuit, à lui seul, forme un monde (LMS 166).

Camus concludes: "Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux" (LMS 166).

Pirandello's Sisyphus is his "l'uomo dal fiore in bocca." His portrait of a man who may die at any time and who has left a cosy domestic scenario for life out on the street or in late-night station cafés displays many of the features and contradictions of Absurdism and mysticism examined in this thesis. He wavers between a desire to live more and as fully as possible and an impulse to annihilate himself or lose himself in all he sees. Like Ionesco's "solitaire", he is an observer, standing outside the normal conventions and routines of life, peering into shop windows and experiencing life as a spectacle through his imagination and his memory. "Sono capace di stare anche un'ora fermo a guardare dentro una bottega attraverso la vetrina. Mi ci dimentico. Mi sembra d'esser, vorrei essere veramente quella stoffa là di seta... quel bordatino ..." (MN I 505). His virtuoso description of a shop assistant's dexterity in wrapping parcels indicates how the fullness of reality has burst upon his consciousness and is savoured in every detail. His apparently irrelevant parable of the doctor's waiting room eventually makes explicit this openness to everything beyond his own life when he compares himself to a waiting room chair waiting to be occupied by a strange life.

As well as contemplation and observation, he survives on isolated sensuous moments – the simple pleasure of eating an apricot, the polished smoothness of a piece of wrapping paper, the sweet sound of a word, "un nome dolcissimo ... più dolce d'una caramella: – Epitelioma, si chiama" (MN I 510).⁸² All the doubleness of the Absurd lies in that tension between his love of the word's sound and what it signifies for him ultimately. There is the same doubleness in his perception of his cancer as a flower.

Pirandello shows us life's awfulness here being fought by actually exploiting the gap between words and reality. From the tiny, banal details of life the man passes to the "metalevel", a more abstract appreciation of how his perception functions:

Ma è che certi richiami d'immagini, tra loro lontane, sono così particolari a ciascuno di noi; e determinati da ragioni ed esperienze così singolari, che l'uno non intenderebbe più l'altro se, parlando, non ci vietassimo di farne uso (MN I 507).

He also delights in expanding his experience of life through his imagination. Yet the obvious pleasure found in this has a desperate *raison d'être*:

Io le dico che ho bisogno d'attaccarmi con l'immaginazione alla vita altrui, ma così, senza piacere, senza punto interessarmene, anzi... anzi... per sentirne il fastidio, per giudicarla sciocca e vana, la vita, cossichè veramente non debba importare a nessuno di finirla (MN I 508).

Like Ionesco's "solitaire" he attempts to de-realise what he sees. But what bubbles through these pessimistic statements of life's inanity is a love of life. The very fact that he needs to use a device to make life seem worthless means that his irrepressible instinct is to believe in its worth. The very self-consciousness with which he expounds these devices is even more poignant. He loves life in the face of death. The play embodies the whole message of Le Mythe de Sisyphe; that life may be meaningless but that does not mean that it isn't worth living.

Finally, the man with the flower in his mouth is an instance of the mode of perception which Pirandello has his dead mother advocate to him in "Colloqui coi personaggi" as a way of surviving the anguish of the war. The word "anche" is of paramount importance here; the mother is not putting forward a version of the "filosofia del lontano" but a double perspective:

- Guarda le cose anche con gli occhi di quelli che non le vedono più! Ne avrai un rammarico, figlio, che te le renderà più sacre e più belle (NA II 1209).

NOTES

¹ Ionesco explains the sub-title "anti-pièce" as "une vraie parodie de pièce, une comédie de la comédie" (NCN 252).

² See SPSV 127.

³ SPSV 158.

⁴ "Per l'umorista le cause, nella vita, non sono mai così logiche, così ordinate, come nelle nostre comuni opere d'arte, in cui tutto è, in fondo, combinato, congegnato, ordinato ai fini che lo scrittore s'è proposto" (SPSV 157). Also SPSV 159.

⁵ See for example, Apollinaire's Prologue to Les Mamelles de Tirésias, Friedrich Durrenblatt's Theater-Schriften und Reden, Brecht's notion of an Epic Theatre, The Dark Comedy by J.L. Styan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) and Avant-garde: The experimental theatre in France by L.C. Pronko (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962).

⁶ George Brandt, "Twentieth-Century Comedy", in Comic Drama: The European Heritage, ed. W.D. Howarth (London: Methuen, 1978), p.167.

⁷ SPSV 156.

⁸ Brandt, p.173.

⁹ "le véritable art dit d'avant-garde ou révolutionnaire, est celui qui s'opposant audacieusement à son temps, se révèle comme inactuel" (NCN 96). "En effet, il s'agissait peut-être, dans mes pièces, d'une critique de la petite bourgeoisie, mais la petite bourgeoisie à laquelle je pensais, n'était pas une classe liée à telle ou telle société car le petit bourgeois était pour moi un être se trouvant dans toutes les sociétés, dites révolutionnaires ou réactionnaires;..." (NCN 109).

¹⁰ "La démystification par l'humour noir", L'Avant-Scène, No.191 (15th February 1959), p.5. Part of the article reappears in NCN 204-5.

¹¹ See NCN 72 and 205.

¹² Similar to Pirandello's example of Giusti's poem is Ionesco's memory from his military service; "Mon adjudant me méprisait parce que je cirais mal mes bottes. Comment lui faire comprendre qu'il y avait aussi d'autres critères que le cirage des bottes?" (NCN 162-3).

¹³ For example Voyages ches les morts, TH VII 69-76; and the Mère Pipe scene in Tueur sans gages, TH II 186-195.

¹⁴ "Irony in its own right has expanded from a minute verbal phenomenon to a philosophy, a way of facing the cosmos." David Worcester, The Art of Satire (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), p.75.

¹⁵ I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (1924: rpt. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p.250.

¹⁶ The Compass of Irony (London: Methuen, 1969), p.229.

¹⁷ Muecke quotes Vladimir Jankélévitch's L'ironie ou la bonne conscience, 2nd (revised) ed. (Paris, 1950): "Irony is the somewhat melancholy gaiety which the discovery of a plurality inspires in us." Muecke, p.232.

¹⁸ MN I 176.

¹⁹ For example JM 48:

Se laisser vivre. Se laisser aller, se laisser flotter sur les
eaux de la durée, se laisser vivre et, ainsi, peut-être parvenir à
pouvoir se laisser mourir.

La moindre résistance. (Ce ne sont que des mots, sans force,
inutiles.)

There is a similar 'doubling' procedure in PPPP where Ionesco interpolates 'contemporary' comment into an early diary which he wrote before settling in France during the war.

Pertinent here is Lukács' definition: "The writer's irony is a negative mysticism to be found in times without a God", George Lukács, The Theory of the Novel, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p.90.

²⁰ Quoted by D.J. Enright in The Alluring Problem: an essay on irony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.15. He is referring to Lilian R. Furst's Fictions of Romantic Irony in European Narrative 1760-1857 (1984).

²¹ Much of Ionesco's writing in his journals falls into this category. His latest volume of personal writings, La Quête intermittente, is so self-conscious in places that it hardly touches pure issues, only the problems of discussing the issues. See for example pp.35-6 and pp.112-113.

²² See Muecke, pp.164-177.

²³ Enright, p.13, quoting Anne K. Mellor's English Romantic Irony (1980). Enright's own definition brings out better the inability of the Romantic Ironist to feel satisfied with anything he expresses because he is dogged by an awareness of the limitations of language and concepts and the multifariousness of reality:

Romantische Ironie, it seems, views the world as chaotic, unpredictable, and inexhaustibly fertile, and the artist, in the face of it, as obliged to recognise the limitations of his own consciousness; his perceptions of the infinite are inevitably partial and thus in some degree false, yet he must rightly value them (what else does he have?), and so he preserves a balance in his work between rhapsodic affirmation and sceptical reservation. (p.12)

Compare JM 118: "je ne peux pas ne pas me tromper car l'intelligence est limitée". Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground provides a kind of 'case study' of the states of mind behind the dilemma of the Romantic Ironist: "a man of character, a man who acts, is essentially limited" (Notes from

Underground, The Double trans. Jessie Coulson [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972], p.16).

24 Enright, p.15.

25 Muecke, p.199.

26 Ibid., p.201. Muecke is paraphrasing Friedrich Schlegel.

27 Charles I. Glicksberg, The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), p.6.

28 Muecke, p.202.

29 This is one of the techniques used by Ionesco in La Cantatrice chauve, Delire à deux and Salutations.

30 The subject of the use of language in the theatre has been thoroughly investigated by Andrew Kennedy in Six Dramatists in Search of a Language (Cambridge University Press, 1975) and Dramatic Dialogue (Cambridge University Press, 1983). The changes in dramatic dialogue can be attributed not only to self-consciousness about language but also to notions of the fragmentation of personality and the relativity of reality. Frequently in modern drama the drama lies not so much in a battle of viewpoints as in a war of words which embodies (rather than expresses) a conflict of characters. This development in drama was identified well before Kennedy's work by Jean Vannier in "Theatre of Language", Tulane Drama Review, 7, 3 (Spring 1963), pp.182-186.

31 Muecke, p.243.

32 Ibid., p.242. Muecke quotes Jean Barzun on p.241: "To admire nothing at all, for fear of being duped is a progressive disease of the spirit."

33 Ionesco comes closer to bearing out Kierkegaard's and Muecke's criticism in La Quête intermittente: "Alors, encore une fois, que faire? La divinité m'est inaccessible. Je dégringole, je dégringole.... Alors quoi? Finies, les fillettes. Je ne peux plus boire. Manger? Ce ne sont les même plats, mais les repas sont courts. Un long, long ennui, c'est cela ma vie." (p.13) Dostoyevsky's Underground man is again illuminating here: "After all, the direct, immediate, legitimate fruit of heightened consciousness is inertia, that is, the deliberate refusal to do anything." (p.26) Another outcome of the awareness of the limits of consciousness and the ineffability of reality in Ionesco's personal writings is a descent into verbal entropy. The arguments will fizzle out into word play or 'sound play'. See for example JM 117-8 and PPPP 90.

34 Glicksberg, p.16.

35 Ionesco notes that exaggeration in general can disrupt the normal sense of things: "Le théâtre est dans l'exagération extrême des sentiments, exagération qui disloque la plate réalité quotidienne" (NCN 60).

36 Wolfgang Kayser says "Structurally, it [the grotesque] presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable." He then refers to

"the progressive dissolution which has occurred since the ornamental art of the Renaissance: fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of "natural" size and shape, the suspension of the category of subjects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order."

The Grotesque in Art and Literature, trans. U. Weisstein (Gloucester, Mass.: Indiana University Press, 1963), p.185.

³⁷ Ibid., p.184. Kayser quotes a passage by the artist Alfred Kubin, some of whose grotesque drawings appeared in the Expressionist Almanach der Blaue Reiter (1911):

"Only in the last few years I have come to see a little more clearly that it is a transitional realm, a twilight region that wants to be expressed by me... In special moments of greater clarity I sometimes sensed the subterranean existence of some mysterious fluid that connects all living matter ... I do not see the world in this manner, but notice these transformations in strange moments when I seem to be only half-awake." (p.209)

³⁸ Geoffrey Harpham, "The grotesque: first principles", Journal of Aesthetics, 34 (1975-6), p.463.

³⁹ Quoted by Kayser, p.53.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.185.

⁴¹ Tilgher's description of the 'world' of the "grootteschi" brings out their proximity to the Absurdists:

... gli autori dei grootteschi, se un carattere hanno in comune, è l'assoluta persuasione che tutto è vano, che tutto è vuoto, che gli uomini sono marionette nelle mani del destino, che i loro dolori, le loro gioie, le loro azioni sono sogni di ombre agitantisi in un mondo di tenebre e di mistero dominato da un cieco destino" (Tilger, pp.111-112).

⁴² See Philip Thomson, The Grotesque, The Critical Idiom No.24 (London: Methuen, 1972), Chapter 5.

⁴³ Kayser, p.188.

⁴⁴ See S.R. Corona Sharp, "The Dance of Death in Modern Drama: Auden, Dürrenmatt and Ionesco", Modern Drama, 20 (1977), pp.107-116.

⁴⁵ See "Luigi Pirandello: an Autobiographical Sketch", Forum Italicum, I, 4 (1967), p.241.

⁴⁶ ECB 39-41.

⁴⁷ Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion (London: Methuen, 1981), p.36.

48 Tzvetan Todorov states that "il faut que le texte oblige le lecteur ... à hésiter entre une explication naturelle et une explication surnaturelle des événements évoqués.... l'hésitation se trouve représentée, elle devient un des thèmes de l'oeuvre;..." Introduction à la littérature fantastique (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp.37-8.

49 "L'expression fantastique est donc fondamentalement relative parce qu'elle est étroitement dépendante des domaines variables du normal et de l'anormal, qui fournissent les éléments de la motivation réaliste." Irène Bessière, Le récit fantastique: la poétique de l'incertain (Paris: Larousse, 1974), p.34.

50 Freud, "The Uncanny", The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: 1953), vol.17, pp.217-52.

51 Sartre, "'Aminadab' ou du fantastique considéré comme un langage", Situations I (Gallimard, 6th ed., 1947), pp.124-5.

52 Jackson, p.84: "The fantastic problematizes representation of the 'real' be it in terms of linguistic competence, or of fabricating monistic versions of 'real' time, space or character."

53 Bessière, p.63.

54 Jackson, p.68, quoting Helene Cixous, "La fiction et ses fantômes: une lecture de l'Unheimliche de Freud", Poétique, 10 (1973), 199-216.

55 Sartre, p.130.

56 Quoted in Jackson, p.68.

57 Ibid., p.179.

58 Ibid., p.78.

59 See *ibid.*, p.80.

60 Todorov, p.176.

61 Jean Bellemin-Noël, "Des formes fantastiques aux thèmes fantasmatiques," Littérature, 2 (May 1971), 103-28, quoted in Jackson, p.62.

62 Jackson, p.102.

63 Jackson's description of the role of the fantastic can be seen to apply to Pirandello's work as a whole: "It reveals reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs, and thereby scrutinises the category of the 'real'.... Breaking single, reductive 'truths', the fantastic traces a space within a society's cognitive frame. It introduces multiple, contradictory 'truths': it becomes polysemic," pp.21-3. See also p.48.

64 Quoted by Jackson, p.108.

⁶⁵ See Franco Zangrilli, "La funzione del paesaggio nella novellistica pirandelliana", in Le Novelle di Pirandello, Atti del 6^o Convegno Interazionale di Studi Pirandelliani, ed. Stefano Millioto (Agrigento: Edizioni del Centro Nazionale di Studi Pirandelliani, 1980), pp.129-172.

⁶⁶ Jackson, p.108.

⁶⁷ Neuro Bonifazi, Teoria del fantastico e il racconto fantastico in Italia: Tarchetti, Pirandello, Buzzati (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1982), p.111.

⁶⁸ Jackson, p.101.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp.175-6.

⁷⁰ NA II 899. "Strappato dal sonno, forse per sbaglio, e buttato fuori dal treno in una stazione di passaggio. Di notte senza nulla con me."

⁷¹ Jackson, p.101.

⁷² See also LPC 133: "Je pris conscience d'une certaine monotonie des villes, des campagnes, des saisons."

⁷³ Notable examples are found in "Visitare gli Inferni": "ma giunse in quella dalla stanza del moribondo un puzzo intollerabile, che fece arricciare il naso a tutti.

- Buon segno! - esclamò qualcuno, avviandosi per recarsi in un'altra stanza. - Si scarica. Parecchi confermarono:

- Buon segno, sí ... buon segno! E tutti, turandosi il naso, seguirono il primo." (NA II 101-102);

and in "Il tabernacolo" (see Chapter 5 of this thesis). Mattia Pascal also 'entombs' his wedding ring in a public lavatory (TR 338).

⁷⁴ "What kind of a country is this where a woman can't weep her heart out on the highways and byways without being tormented by retired bill-brokers!... Oh cursed corset! If I could let it out, without indecent exposure. Mr. Tyler! Mr. Tyler! Come back and unlace me behind the hedge! (She laughs wildly, ceases.) What's wrong with me, what's wrong with me, never tranquil, seething out of my dirty old pelt, out of my skull, oh to be in atoms, in atoms! (Frenziedly) ATOMS!" (London: Faber, 1965), p.13.

⁷⁵ "Estragon: Si on se pendait?
Vladimir: Ce serait un moyen de bander."
(London: Harrap, 1966), p.11.

David Hesla's perception that "the shape of Beckett's art is the shape of dialectic" is of undoubted relevance here. He points to "a synthesis of the positive and the negative, the comic and the 'pathetic', the yes and the no.... Optimism and pessimism, hope and despair, comedy and tragedy are counterbalanced by one another: none of them is allowed to become an Absolute." David H. Hesla, The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the

Art of Samuel Beckett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp.215-6.

Vivian Mercier structured his book Beckett/Beckett on the perception (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁷⁶ LMS, p.77.

⁷⁷ For example, TH IV 14, 32, 58.

⁷⁸ This relativity of perspective is also a theme in mystical writing.

"Infinitely small things are as large as large things can be,
For here no external conditions obtain;
Infinitely large things are as small as small things can be,
For objective limits are here of no consideration"

"Buddhist Poem 'On Trust in the Heart'", quoted by Happold, p.168.

⁷⁹ The same ambiguity is found in The Upanishads: "Mind is indeed the source of bondage and also the source of liberation", p.104.

⁸⁰ Cf. The Upanishads, "In silent wonder the wise see him as the life flaming in all creation", p.80.

⁸¹ Domenico Vittorini, The Drama of Luigi Pirandello (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1935), p.vi.

⁸² The man's experience is precisely the opposite of Roquentin's with the dirty stone on the beach of Bouville. He revels in the otherness of the material world. Muecke suggests an interesting link between irony and language:

"The possibility of taking an ironical view may be directly derived from something as fundamental as the uniquely human capacity for using language 'symbolically'. To be able to substitute words for things means being able to emerge, partly though not entirely, from the mere flux of the purely subjective, from the levels of mere feeling, mere experience, and merely instinctive action.", p.219.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that the Absurd worldview shares a number of assumptions and structures with that of mystical writers. Whereas this parallel is perceptible in the texts of many Absurdist writers, in the work of Pirandello and Ionesco, the close relationship between the Absurd experience and the mystical one is explicit and is often a central theme. While such experiences are key events in their plots or in the lives of their characters, their texts also express or embody the consciousness which results from those experiences. This consciousness underpins all their work, unifying the diversity both of theme and artistic form. While frequently the object of serious scrutiny, the mystical experience may also function as a structural device in the service of a humorous or satiric vision. I would contend that the mystical experience is the single most important feature of their work. Even where the subject matter is not explicitly mystical, the texts of Pirandello and Ionesco have a mystical subtext and are largely predicated on structures which can be identified as mystical. These structures pervade not only their ideas but inform their aesthetics and their artistic theories. Their work is imbued with images also to be found in the religious and mystical texts of a number of cultures. Very often their style of writing recalls the syntax, rhythms and vocabulary of such texts.

We have seen that some of the texts of Pirandello and Ionesco explore the possibility of mystical experience as a way of life. Although the search for permanent plenitude fails in both, they differ slightly in their final stance. Ionesco remains resolutely turned towards the beyond, persistently rejecting the [^]constructed world and scrutinising the limits of human

knowledge in the hope that the transcendent will be revealed. In Pirandello's work, by contrast, the failure of the visionary quest prompts a return to the world in the recognition that as long as we possess 'mind' and bodily form, we are inevitably estranged from the 'beyond'. However, this return does not imply the resumption of life as it was before the visionary moment. The insights of that moment transform consciousness permanently. The subject returns to the constructed world in full awareness of its factitious nature. He now lives with a double perspective which constitutes at once his torment and his liberation: he must live by means of illusions but is no longer imprisoned by the illusion that they are absolutes.

It is my contention, however, that this thematic difference between the two writers ultimately has the same aesthetic outcome. Although Ionesco turns his back on the world, he cannot wholly escape it. He too must carry on living with a double perspective. The mystical quest in both writers becomes a way of seeing, a quality of consciousness, an outcome which accounts for the presence of mystical structures and double perspectives at every level of their work.

Appendix: La Quête intermittente

La Quête intermittente was published too late for there to be a full account of it in this thesis. A first reading reveals that although Ionesco has returned once again to the form of the fragmented "journal intime" and to his familiar themes of mortality, dreams and the nature of the self, the text also largely confirms the contentions made in this study.

Mysticism is not only the central preoccupation here but has taken on an overtly Christian, theistic colouring. Ionesco addresses God and Jesus directly, almost transforming a diary into a book of prayer in places. But as ever, mystical fervour is intermingled with doubt: "peut-être que je crois moi aussi, sans croire que je crois, sans savoir trop si je crois ou si je ne crois pas. 'Mon Dieu, faites que je croie en Vous!'" (LQI 95).

The links between the Absurd and Mysticism are confirmed here: "L'espérance ne peut naître que du désespoir le plus profond, le plus authentique" (LQI 35). And Ionesco even thanks a journalist for reminding him that his cultural role has been to "'faire co-exister le souvenir de l'illumination' avec le sentiment moderne de l'absurde" (LQI 113-14).

However Ionesco's mystical tendencies have also been tempered and can be seen to reflect the changes which were noted in chapter five in the analysis of La Soif et la faim. Not only do relationships – particularly family relationships – figure strongly in his reflections, but Ionesco appears to have accepted the impossibility of permanent plenitude and the necessity of taking the world into account. "Vivre religieusement car on ne peut vivre mystiquement, métaphysiquement. Le religieux vous remet les pieds sur terre. Dans la morale. Dans l'histoire" (LQI 122).

This new position may account for the strengthening of the double perspectives in this work. Incongruity reaches its apex when a passage of

religious contemplation is interrupted for one sentence with "Je devrais surveiller mes repas, ne pas avoir ces digestions pénibles..." (LQI 119). Such double perspectives have always been present in Ionesco's journals, but here they are harsher and have a self-conscious quality. Indeed, Ionesco defines his stance as "Un regard vers Dieu. Hélas, toujours ce clin d'oeil aux hommes, aux hommes de la 'littérature'" (LQI 121), and pertinently wonders "Et comment ces 'bouffées', si je puis dire, de 'spiritualité' peuvent-elles, chez moi, cohabiter avec ma vanité?" (LQI 115). Finally, in the context of this comparative study, a further significant development is Ionesco's realisation of the power of consciousness, a realisation which brings him even closer to the position held by both Pirandello and Camus: "La conscience de l'illusion confirme ma réalité" (LQI 96).

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